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Producing Unschoolers: Learning Through Living in a U.S. Education Movement

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Abstract

In this study, I explore some of the inherent and lived tensions or paradoxes produced through the principles and practices of the governmental and educational contexts of the neoliberal milieu, through the lens of a contemporary countercultural movement. In the particularities of this movement, a community of practice known to insiders as the “unschooling movement,” families seek to challenge the rationalization and standardization that they perceive as rampant and objectionable in state-overseen education. This is an ethnographic study of the countercultural praxis and identities entailed in cultivating unschooled children through distinctive childhood, familial, and community-based experiences. I consider dimensions of lifestyle that include attachment parenting, the organization of space and time, consumption, community-based education and legitimation (portfolio evaluations) to prove educational equivalence. This study reveals the hidden resources of social capital and educational capital used to sustain a countercultural educational alternative.

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PRODUCING UNSCHOOLERS: LEARNING THROUGH LIVING IN A U.S.
EDUCATION MOVEMENT.

Donna Harel Kirschner

A DISSERTATION

in

Anthropology

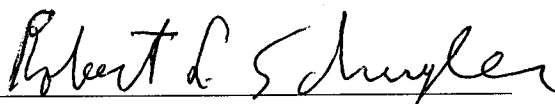
Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2005



Supervisor of the Dissertation



Graduate Group Chairperson

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Dedication

For Andy –You wrote your book at night so I could write during the day. You sustain me.

For Ella- You taught me what's at stake. You've warmed my heart and lightened my load.

For Maya- My little catalyst. You've taught me to slow down and savor the bounty.

For Mom- You've taught me a thing or two about women, power and perseverance.

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As for the work itself:

Research: Learning About Unschooling

All Of The Unschooling Families And Movement Activists Upon Whom This Work Is Based -

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Analysis: Helping Me Think and Write About Unschooling

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Abstract

Producing Unschoolers: Learning Through Living in a U.S. Education Movement

Donna H. Kirschner

Kathleen Hall, Supervisor

In this study, I explore some of the inherent and lived tensions or paradoxes produced through the principles and practices of the governmental and educational contexts of the neoliberal milieu, through the lens of a contemporary countercultural movement. In the particularities of this movement, a community of practice known to insiders as the “unschooling movement,” families seek to challenge the rationalization and standardization that they perceive as rampant and objectionable in state-overseen education. This is an ethnographic study of the countercultural praxis and identities entailed in cultivating unschooled children through distinctive childhood, familial, and community-based experiences. I consider dimensions of lifestyle that include attachment parenting, the organization of space and time, consumption, community-based education and legitimation (portfolio evaluations) to prove educational equivalence. This study reveals the hidden resources of social capital and educational capital used to sustain a countercultural educational alternative.

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Introduction

The Neoliberal Order: A Reconfigured State Widens the Educational Marketplace

The last three and a half decades have seen the ascendance in principle and practice of neoliberalism, a doctrine that treats market exchange as an ethic that guides human action, including a reconfiguration of the State (Harvey 2005). As one of the dominant, utopian discourses of the economic world at the turn of the century, the neoliberal order has been critiqued as profoundly anti-democratic on the grounds that it introduces an economic logic based on competition and efficiency to a social logic, which is subject to the rules of fairness (Bourdieu 1998). Moreover, the neoliberal state's fundamental mission is to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the one hand, while the state has also eroded its welfare obligations towards citizens on the other (Harvey 2005). Thus, in the areas of health care, public education, and social services, which have been a mainstay of the operations of the social democratic state, the privileging of free-market policies and metaphors over concerns for the role of the state in providing public benefits has produced a utilitarian conception of citizens as consumers (Hall 2005: 1, 2).

These neoliberal processes can be seen in educational policy and practice in the United States, where education, which has traditionally been constructed as part of the social good accorded by the state, has increasingly been opened to market metaphors and practices (c.f. Apple 2000; Hall 2005). Consequently, the reconfiguration of the public sector as "product" provider has shifted the focus of educational management's focus towards serving citizen-customers with quality services, including educational services, in an increasingly rationalized manner (Hall 2005:2; McDermott and Hall 2007). As a consequence, much public policy in education has been geared towards "standardization" in curriculum and

assessment of teacher, student, and school performances through increased reliance on standardized testing, as in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

Yet, if state-run education has seen increased rationalism and standardization in the neoliberal order, these same conditions, with the intent of providing increasing educational options for parent/consumer “choice,” have also opened the educational “marketplace” to a number of additional educational ventures, which may signal the further erosion of state oversight of education. In addition to a longstanding tradition of private and parochial schools, the last several decades have seen the growth in a range of public-private configurations and charter schools. In addition, the most rapidly-growing development on the educational landscape, a range of disparate home-based education initiatives known collectively as “the homeschooling movement” are effectively divorced from all but the most basic oversight of the state (c.f. Lines 2000; 2001). As it removes curriculum from education, unschooling, an educational movement within the broader homeschooling movement, stands at a further remove from the institutional mores of mainstream education.

In this study, I explore some of the inherent and lived tensions or paradoxes produced through the principles and practices of the governmental and educational contexts of the neoliberal milieu, through the lens of a contemporary countercultural movement. In the particularities of this movement, known to insiders as the “unschooling movement,” families seek to challenge the rationalization and standardization that they perceive as rampant and objectionable in state-overseen education.

It behooves us to understand the perspective and experiences of people who in their daily lives create viable alternatives to an educational system whose future is uncertain (Tyack and Cuban 1995). My ethnographic research will provide a crucial and heretofore

unexamined perspective on education in the U.S. as it takes a perspective from outside of the traditional education system. It will thus answer recent calls within educational anthropology to examine education and learning in contexts outside of schools (Levinson and Holland 1996; Singleton 1998). In uncovering variation and differences in the American middle classes and elucidating what some see as the “culture of power” in American society, this study responds to calls within Anthropology to study “up” (Nader 1972; Gusterson 1997). This work also answers a general call within the discipline for anthropologists to engage with perplexing public issues (Hymes et al 1972; Sanday et al 1976; Peacock 1997; Forman 1995; Johnston et al 1997, Sanday 1998; Borofsky 2002). As a movement that takes education as its object of critique and innovation, unschooling has relevance for often-polarized debates within American cultural politics over the future direction of education.

Countercultural Endeavors in the Neoliberal Context: Imagined Futures and Social Activism Lodged Away From the State and Towards Lifestyle

In this milieu of the neoliberal state and the market-based educational climate, countercultural movements that challenge rationalization and standardization in education provide a lens to consider how people sustain challenges over the direction of societal self-production in general and through the production of educated persons in particular (Cox 1995; Levinson et al 1996).

A number of researchers, particularly sociologists have recently come to see countercultures, complex social formations of developments ranging from New Social Movements, alternative economies, and contemporary subcultures, as parts of a single historical process (Cox 1996). The concept of a counterculture addresses such phenomena

as historically developed complexes of institutions and practices, structures of meaning, forms of consciousness, and modes of organization of everyday life for participants (ibid). Countercultures offer a perspective on the sociocultural processes through which people and groups work out alternative logics; they emphasize the centrality of alternative skills and knowledge in the making of the counterculture. Countercultures often lead to conflict with dominant or mainstream institutions, particularly in the U.S. on sociocultural (as opposed to sociopolitical) lines. While the notion of the countercultures as unitary entities working against a reified mainstream poses problems for theories of culture that see societies as pluralistic, the notion of a countercultural project captures what unschoolers are trying to achieve as they work to produce a movement that seeks to affect social change and create an alternative lifestyle with different values from what they perceive as “the mainstream.” In their countercultural endeavors, unschoolers assume different notions of childrearing, different social relations and different ways of life than the constructed mainstream of their critiques. I thus work within the framework of the countercultural to consider these unschooling processes within the realm of everyday life and, more specifically, within the realm of lifestyles.

In this study, I consider some of the challenges related to creating, enacting, and legitimating a countercultural lifestyle, and, more specifically, a countercultural education-focused lifestyle in the context of US neoliberalism. Specifically, I consider the details of the unschooling movement, a countercultural lifestyle movement and sub-set of the homeschooling movement in the United States¹ that takes “education” as its object of lived

¹ Just as homeschooling has developed internationally, the unschooling movement has also developed in Canada, parts of Western Europe, Israel, Japan, and Australia, where it is often described as the “Natural Learning” movement (*GLWS 2001* directory). I chose to focus on unschooling in the United States as it remains the epicenter of the movement and for analytic clarity. Namely, because the countercultural lifestyle that

critique of “mainstream” American culture, to consider how practitioners of such movements not only construct the mainstream but also produce what they consider viable alternatives to it.

Framing Questions

In my study, I address the following four questions:

1. *What are the mechanisms through which the unschooling countercultural project articulates an authoritative vision of the mainstream culture and education as well as the alternative?*

This highlights the operation within the countercultural enterprise of novel forms of expertise that are garnered through social networks and the educational resources (capital and habits of research) of practitioners as they develop their countercultural identities over time.

2. *What type of “work” does it take for unschoolers to enact the lifestyle vision in everyday practice?*

This focuses ethnographic attention to how unschoolers organize space, time, interactions with children, and consumption distinctively in the context of a society structured according to somewhat different cultural norms and values, both tacit and explicit.

3. *How do unschoolers maintain their lifestyle in the face of cultural conflicts?*

This compels attention to how unschoolers negotiate encounters with outsiders or people and institutions that unschoolers often construct as “mainstream” and how they inculcate such habits in their children.

4. *How do unschoolers legitimate their alternative values, practices, and processes in relation to regulatory institutions, in this case the state, which regulates the public provision of education?*

unschoolers are constructing serves as a lived critique of the “mainstream” of US culture and educational processes.

This compels attention to the range of strategies and dispositions with respect to the state that unschoolers develop to achieve what the state deems as “educational equivalence.”

Basic Findings

Work at each level of investigation focuses attention to how unschoolers deploy or the “activate” different forms of capital to legitimate, enact effectively, and maintain a countercultural lifestyle. Insofar as unschooling can be considered a viable alternative to conventional education, its viability is predicated upon the ability of participants to possess a facility with the “mainstream” as they construct it and to cultivate in their children both the “alternative” traits that characterize an unschooled young person as well as those traits that assure them reasonable success in the “mainstream” culture. In this case, ample capital, specifically educational and social capital, as well as hidden parental (specifically gendered) labor, which is often obscured by the particulars of unschoolers’ practices, produce this viability.

The case itself represents a study of the countercultural praxis entailed in cultivating unschooled children through distinctive childhood, familial, and community-based experiences. That is, by examining this case, I explore the countercultural production of children who are more or less educated by unschoolers’ standards, behind which also stand some “mainstream” and institutional definitions and standards of an educated person (Levinson and Holland 1996). Such an investigation required me to pay attention to unschoolers’ definitions of an educated person and to the educative practices by which they sought to produce such persons. Moreover, through the production of a particular type of educated person, unschoolers attempt to also contribute to producing a distinct form of

social order. They not only aim to produce individuals as educated persons, but through this effort change American culture, or at least a subculture within America. This is what makes it a counter-cultural social movement. Thus, as a study of countercultural endeavors, I consider the dimensions of lifestyle (namely parenting practices, temporalities, spatial arrangements, interpersonal relationships, and consumption) as the principles and practices through which such production takes place as well as how unschoolers set these values and practices in opposition to what they construct as the “mainstream.” In other words, I consider how the construction of the “educated person” is linked to a particular ideal way of life.

II. Literature Review

A. Research on Homeschooling and Unschooling

Scholars have thus far conducted a fairly-limited amount of rigorous and unbiased research on homeschooling in general and unschooling in particular. Much of this research entails survey-based studies. These studies focus on academic achievement (Ray 1996,1997; Rudner, 1999), or ask parents about their choices to homeschool (e.g., Bauman, 2002; Knowles 1988, 1991; Mayberry 1988, 1991; Ray, 1997; Rudner, 1999; Van Galen 1987, 1988, 1991), or look at statistics and other demographic information that describe homeschoolers (e.g., Henke et al, 2000 [US census bureau]; Bielick et al 1999; Bauman, 2002; Ray, 1997; Rudner, 1999). With the exception of Nemer’s (2004) study of how homeschoolers of all stripes view the state-run educational institutions they reject, this generally descriptive research fails to examine broader questions about homeschooling and how it relates to wider educational contexts or contemporary American culture.

Moreover, although the media frequently reports on homeschooling and homeschoolers themselves have written extensively about their lives (see appendix), scant scholarly qualitative data attends to what homeschooling means to the people who do it. Moreover, most people writing about homeschooling and sometimes homeschoolers themselves describe the phenomenon as a “movement” without defining this term. Yet, sociologist Mitchell Stevens (2001) begins to answer this call as he provides a qualitative analysis of homeschoolers’ webs of affiliation, regarding them as competing movements. Stevens compares the political efficacy of two types of homeschooling groups, whom he identifies along axes of ideology and social organization. He terms these groups “believers,” those who base their homeschooling principles, practices and group affiliations around a fundamentalist Christian faith and the more eclectic “inclusives,” who homeschool with a range of generally secular principles and practices and who include all homeschoolers into their groups. The latter group encompasses unschoolers like those in my study. None of these studies analyze homeschooling in general and unschooling in particular from the perspective of a lifestyle movement or with attention to what it daily and over the life course means to construct and enact a countercultural critique. My study fills in this research gap and provides an approach that helps understand the ideal and lived ways that these homeschoolers create a viable alternative to the conventional education that they critique.

B. Countercultural Efforts as Lived Critique and Evolving Identity

I draw upon the concept of countercultures as it helps to describe how people participate in sustained challenges over the directions of societal self-production and of themselves through their lifeworlds (Cox 1996). Although this model to some extent reifies culture as a

“choice,” it has the advantage over New Social Movement (NSM) approaches (Escobar 1992; Habermas 1981; Melucci 1985, 1994; Touraine 1992) as it encapsulates both the political and the cultural aspects of the challenges that people sustain through their everyday lives. Typically, those who engage in countercultural endeavors are adamantly anti-authoritarian, iconoclastically individualistic and espouse lofty visions of personal and/or societal transformation (Sirius 2004). Moreover, attention to the countercultural captures what anthropologists of cultural politics and social protest, Richard Fox and Orin Starn, have termed the “politics of the possible” (1992). In addition, the counterculture has a rich history in the United States, which some have described as part of a single historical process (c.f. Zicklin 1983, Roszak 1969).

Those interested in cultural politics have pointed to the ways that participants in countercultural movements personally and socially learn countercultural sensibilities, principles, and practices. Cultural production theorists attend to the “contingent and fluid identifications of actors involved in these social dramas,” in which the bases of identity are historical as well as changing through time and through political process (Levinson and Holland 1996:11). To capture the social and personal experiences of how participants in a countercultural project learn a countercultural sensibility and identity, I draw loosely upon the model of social learning through legitimate peripheral participation that Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger articulated together (1991) and which Wenger articulates in his study of learning, meaning, and identity through communities of practice (1998). These authors contend that through social learning among people who develop “shared ways of pursuing their common interests” (Wenger 1998:7), practitioners evolve ongoing and contingent identities. Wenger thus characterizes identity as: a negotiated experience of self (in terms of

participation and reification); a membership; a learning trajectory; a nexus of multi-membership and belonging defined globally but experienced locally (Wenger 1998:150). I find this model helpful as I consider how unschoolers' identities as countercultural practitioners develop and evolve over the course of their myriad experiences as parents and as unschoolers.

C. Countercultural Efforts as Lifestyle Practice(s)

I sought to understand the resources and cultural work, such as habits, through which unschoolers construct their lives and educational practices as distinct and countercultural. While unschoolers often rail against "mainstream" culture, they are still, in some ways, embedded within the status systems that they challenge. Specifically, unschoolers typically hail from the middle classes in the United States and often enjoy advanced educational degrees and close social networks. In studying unschoolers' countercultural efforts to assume different notions of childrearing, social relations and ways of life from the mainstream that they critique, this study seeks to explode our tendency to see the middle class as homogeneous.

Yet it behooves us to understand some of the ways that unschoolers' typically middle class sensibilities inform their educational dispositions. For example, parents' class positions, ethnic backgrounds, political leanings, values, and their experiences with the education system inform their sensibilities about education (c.f. Bourdieu 1984/1991; Heath 1983; Fussell 1983). For example, the deeply individualistic focus of unschooling resonates with what some have described as "core" American values.² However, the idea that children

² For discussions of American core values, particularly those related to individualism, see Arensberg and Neihoff 1972, Bellah et al 1985, Hsu 1972 and Peacock 1998. See Kusserow's (2004) nuanced critique of a

should ask their own questions and experience the world as freely as possible resonates specifically with the mores of middle- and upper-middle class Americans who have ample educational capital (Kusserow 2004). In contrast, observers of the various social classes in American society have noted that working-class parents often value education that imparts discipline or obedience over self-direction (Fussell 1983:8; Kusserow).

To make sense of these conditions and the lifestyle practices that I observed, I turned in large part to the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu emphasizes the ways that individuals of a certain social class deeply internalize and embody social structures through their “habitus.” Bourdieu defines habitus as:

systems of durable, transposable dispositions...principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules (1977:72).

Habitus develops in individuals in large part from early socialization experiences in which people internalize external social conditions (e.g., how wealth is distributed) (Kusserow 2004:viii). Although habitus is often rooted in what people typically experience as private and subjective tastes, aspirations, beliefs, hopes, and dispositions, Bourdieu notes that the habitus “could be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class” (Bourdieu 1977: 86). That is, attributes that might at first seem like traits of an individual are sometimes rather the subjective inculcation of the class structure, or in this case of the countercultural movement. This is why I focused my ethnographic attention upon particular habits of life among unschoolers.

monolithic American “individualism.”

Given that an unschooling lifestyle sometimes entails limited economic capital, I also find helpful Bourdieu's notions of "capital" that reach beyond economic capital. For example, his notions of "cultural capital" (i.e., general cultural background, knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, passed from one generation to the next) and symbolic capital (i.e., accumulated prestige and/or honor) embed the notion of educational capital, which virtually all of the unschoolers I encountered enjoyed in ample form. To be sure, I follow Bourdieu as he takes us to the materialist basis of how cultural and symbolic capital work, when he explains that they refer to a:

Transformed and thereby disguised form of physical "economic" capital that conceals the fact that it originates in material forms of capital, which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects (1977:183).

Thus, attention to cultural and economic capital further focuses our attention on habits, whether childrearing practices, uses of space, relationships to time, mores for interaction, and an individual's facility and competences with institutions.

I find Bourdieu's theory compelling because it attunes us to the strategies and actions that individuals follow in their everyday lives, particularly with how they contend with challenges to their practices. As I am concerned with how these countercultural practitioners contend with issues of legitimacy throughout their experiences, I also found helpful Lareau and Horvat's reminder that the:

value of capital depends heavily on the social setting (or field) [and that] there is an important difference between the possession and activation of capital resources.

That is, people who have social and cultural capital may choose to activate capital or not, and they vary in the skill with which they activate it. [In addition], these two

points come together to suggest that rather than being an overly deterministic continual process, reproduction [particularly of advantage], is jagged and uneven and is continually negotiated by social actors. (1999:38)

The way that Lareau and Horvat draw our attention to the “activation,” or actual moments of use of capital helps us to understand how countercultural practitioners activate their various types of resources or capital in order to legitimate their practices and, I would contend, that such processes further develop their countercultural knowledge and identities. I thus draw upon Bourdieu and the work of Lareau and her colleagues to understand unschoolers’ lifestyle entailments and how they legitimate these as well as socialize and cultivate into their children their various habits (c.f. Lareau 1987). I also use them as a model to think about how unschoolers develop, draw upon, and “activate” their cultural, educational, and social capital across their experiences as countercultural practitioners.

I have chosen the particular lifestyle dimensions of practices related to parenting (chapter four), space, time, and mores for interaction (chapter five), consumption (chapter six), use of the community (chapter seven), and legal legitimation (chapter eight) as these are common dimensions of lifestyle to consider and because they illuminate the unschooling countercultural experience particularly well. Although threads of each lifestyle dimension run across the unschooling experience, I give distinct consideration to these aspects of unschoolers’ lives in my separate chapters. I have also organized my study across the developmental experience of unschooling families, so that I show how these families grow as countercultural practitioners from their earliest experiences in childhood and childrearing through the teenage life of their unschooled children. My final chapter deals with the issue of legal legitimacy and covers the range of unschooling families’ experiences for children

from age eight, when the state of Pennsylvania takes an interest in homeschooled children's whereabouts.

D. Childhood Studies and Cultivation

Comparative work on childhood should aim at the analysis of how different discursive practices produce different childhoods, each and all of which are "real" within their own regime of truth (Stephens 1995: 6).

The notion of the child as a project belongs to a middle-class and Anglo (U.S.) system of values and practices... oriented toward the child's physiological, psychological, and moral development, and enforced by child-rearing experts of various kinds (Castenada 2004:76).

The way we bring up our children ... often reflects more about our social history and our folkways and our traditions than what babies and children might need and expect (Small, 2001:3).

In modernity, childhood has become a site of active negotiation over the future (Stephens 1995). Unschooling presents a compelling case for understanding efforts at social change and imagined futures via alternative child-rearing practices. The attempts of unschoolers to provide their children an upbringing divorced not only from the institutional sites of, but also from the basic elements and practices of schooling suggests a challenge to the logic of one of the dominant processes by which modern educated persons are culturally produced (c.f. Levinson et al 1997). What types of persons do these unschooling parents hope to produce instead and what hopes for the future do their efforts reveal? In carefully attending to the processes through which unschoolers formulate and act upon their critiques of the dominant system of education in America to create alternative childhoods and ways of living

in the world, I add to our understanding of the daily forms of social protest and innovation of the notion of “childhood” that inform the cultural politics of the possible.

Unschoolers simultaneously scoff at and participate in conceptualizations and practices that construct children as “projects.” To capture this tension, I here draw upon the metaphor of cultivation to consider unschoolers’ socialization praxis, the practices in which they engage to enact their distinctive version of child development. I suggest that “cultivation” operates as a fitting metaphor for unschoolers’ socialization practices. First, at an emic level, “cultivation” captures the organic quality that many unschoolers use to characterize their understandings of child development and their childrearing praxis.

Second, my analytic framework of socialization as cultivation also addresses the historical and cultural (in this case, classed and, implicitly, raced-based) system of values and practices associated with childhood as a project, which has specific middle-class Anglo entailments (Castenada 2004; Kusserow 2004). Moreover, as Adrie Kusserow suggests, parents of the middle class often see the project of parenting in the florid terms of “assisting the child in emerging, unfolding, flowering –helping to actualize his or her unique qualities, thoughts and feelings” (Kusserow 2004: 99). The analytic metaphor of cultivation also draws out a number of tensions surrounding the effort to make sense of unschoolers’ principles and practices: for while, on the one hand, unschoolers valorize the type of upbringing that Lareau associates with working class families, which she described as the “accomplishment of natural growth” (characterized by considerable unstructured time), this accomplishment of a “natural” or “unschooled” child entails considerable, often invisible effort, on the part of parents, as I detail throughout this study.³

³ Stevens offers similar insights about the considerable parental effort obscured by unschoolers’ focus on “child direction” (Stevens 2001: 87-94). However, he does not offer extensive detail to substantiate this assertion.

In other words, unschoolers' discursive constructions of their socialization practices as heavily focused upon how children "grow" "naturally," "organically," and "like weeds," in something of a "free range childhood"⁴ belies the intensity of parental cultivation. Instead, unschooling parents cultivate, or "bestow labour and attention upon... so as to promote... growth" of their children and the conditions that surround them (from Oxford English Dictionary Online) with an intensity that unschoolers themselves do not recognize at times. I suspect that the occlusion of this intense cultivation has much to do with the ways in which manifold forms of parental capital (the resources at "work") as well as the child-centered ideologies of unschooling pedagogy⁵ operate behind the scenes in unschoolers' principles and practices.

When I invoke the notions of educational and social capital, I draw upon Bourdieu's notion of the role of education in the production of cultural capital in the first instance and of the extended notion of the ability to cultivate social networks in the second. I use the term educational rather than cultural capital as, in this case of unschooling, I wish to

⁴ This phrase, which a number of unschooling parents in my study used to describe their children's lives, is drawn from the title of Matthew Appleton's (2000) *A Free Range Childhood: Self-Regulation at Summerhill School*. Appleton uses a restrictive sense of the phrase, which carries a twofold meaning. He explains in the introduction:

I find [the phrase] very descriptive of the easygoing freedom that the kids enjoy here. The kids truly have free range in that they can play around the school grounds as much as they like, without being under adult supervision. But they also are free in the range of thoughts and feeling they are able to express, without being caged in by adult concepts of "niceness" or "politeness."

While these meanings capture the sensibilities that many unschoolers articulate about their children's lives, the phrase "free range" also indexes the type of consumer ethos practiced by many unschoolers; the term "free range" is a USDA term that describes the condition of poultry in which "Producers must demonstrate to the Agency that the poultry has been allowed access to the outside." (<http://www.usda.gov/>). Like others who base their consumption practices on health/humanitarian and environmental concerns, many unschoolers contend that such practices are more "natural" and healthier than the factory-farmed versions of poultry. For unschoolers, the analogy goes deeper, as the use of the term "free range" indexes a contrast to the mass-production style that they attribute to conventional education; they believe that their version of childhood is not only more humane, but also unique, for it allows children to "graze" for what they "need." I explore these embodied and consumption-oriented analogies in greater detail throughout this study and particularly in chapters four and six.

⁵ Stevens, focusing on the invisibility of maternal labor in the "secular" homeschooling movement [which in his Believer/inclusive typology includes unschoolers], offers similar insights about how the child-centered quality of an unschooling pedagogy renders parents, particularly mothers, effectively invisible (Stevens 2001:93-4).

highlight how parental education shapes how parents facilitate an unschooling education for their children. While I share Bourdieu's general concern about the transferability of these forms of capital into economic capital and, ultimately, in the structuring of systems of inequality, I am most interested in how parents draw upon or activate their educational and social assets, particularly in contexts of real and potential challenges to their countercultural praxis. In contrast to Lareau and Horvat's (1999) concern with particular (gate-keeping) moments or instances of the *activation* of capital, I am most interested in the ways that unschoolers marshal these resources in daily encounters and only take up the issue of activation for gatekeeping purposes in the last chapter, where I attend to unschoolers' legitimating practices vis-à-vis the state.

--Cultivation And Unschooling Ideas Of Development

Through this process, the child's ever-changing body is slowly transformed into the comparatively stable, physically mature, and culturally inscribed adult form. ...The condition of childhood therefore finds its value in potentiality. (Casteneda 2004:4).

Unschoolers typically premise their practices on a distinctive set of ideals related to child development. An unschooling construction of development, described in various manifestations ranging from Jean Leidloff's "continuum concept" (1973) to the theories development that underpin the "attachment" practices that I consider in chapter four, posits that when children's biological, social, and emotional *needs* are met in an uninterrupted, continuous manner through full integration in ever-expanding social relationships (beginning with the primacy of the mother-child bond, then moving outward —often through the

presupposed nuclear, then trans-generational family), s/he needs little formal training during the outward moves toward participation in local community life and in voluntary associations.

This perspective holds that under such circumstances, children retain their ability to self-regulate or, in more-common unschooling parlance, have “self-understanding.” In other words, this construction of development holds that unschooling leaves intact a child’s deep knowledge of what they need to learn at a given time as well as how to go about learning that skill, knowledge, etc. Finally, an unschooling construction of development holds that children make outward moves into the “world” gradually and seamlessly, when they are ready. In this sense, an unschooling model of child development produces an “unschooled” adult form whose impressions of her/himself and the “world” are of what unschoolers would characterize as openness, belonging, and responsibility, and which critics might describe as a well-cultivated sense of “entitlement.”

--Cultivation Practices in Family, Home, and Community: Sowing, Fortification and Pest Control in an Unschooled Garden

In my main ethnographic chapters (chapters four-eight), I consider how unschoolers develop and enact their principles and practices of child development and, to some extent, how they cultivate in their children their countercultural dispositions. I consider the “labour and attention” that unschooling parents bestow upon their children, “so as to promote... growth,” in what most unschoolers would contend are *organic* gardens (see OED ref., above). Thus, whenever possible, I attend to three related dimensions of cultivation: preparing the soil, weeding and controlling pestilence, and supporting the plants as they grow. In other

words, I highlight the practices, sensibilities, resources, and interactions involved in an unschooled lifestyle that supports producing unschooled children. These practices and ideas, as the cultivation metaphor suggests, have as much to do with the effort to produce boundaries against a particular construction of “mainstream” and “schooled” culture as they do with efforts to promote unschooling.

In chapter four, I consider unschooling family life, with a focus on parenting practices, which set the stage (or, stretching the analogy to the hilt, sow the seeds) for both their countercultural identities and the types of learning practices in which unschoolers engage in their homes (the subject of chapters five and six) and as they participate in their communities (the subject of chapter seven).

In each chapter, I take up various themes that emerge contextually, but which pervade an unschooling lifestyle. Thus, I highlight the workings of attachment as a central component of unschooling praxis in chapter four, where my attention fixes upon unschooling family life as it comes into highest relief in early parenting practices. On the other hand, in chapter five, I consider how the distinctive interactional dynamics, cadences, and spatial dimensions of an unschooling lifestyle operate to produce an unschooling home as a context for competent foraging, although this also occurs in other arenas of unschooling praxis.⁶ In chapter six, I consider how unschoolers engage in distinctive consumption practices to create boundaries to the “schooled” world and to cultivate in their children particular tastes and habits. I highlight these themes in chapter seven, where I consider how unschoolers attempt to incorporate the sensibilities of community participation, what I often

⁶ To be sure, an unschooling social event, such as an unschooling basketball game, writing group, or play date might share the temporal, spatial, and interactional gestalt that I detail in my consideration of unschoolers’ homes. However, the feel of such settings are, in large part, an outgrowth of the home lives of unschoolers, which serve as crucibles or, in Weber’s term, “workshops” for such sensibilities (1968).

describe as a “village” epistemology, into their children’s gradual movement into participation within communities beyond their homes. I also consider how, through all of these practices, unschoolers seek to cultivate in their children the habits of self-understanding, critical consumption, self-advocacy, and social networking.

--Cultivation and the Construction of a Countercultural Identity

Throughout this text, I consider unschoolers’ ongoing development as countercultural practitioners through their experiences when they construct and respond to a perceived mainstream. Unschoolers’ countercultural identities emerge and evolve both through their daily practices and in specific situations when they find themselves challenged, either from without or in contrastive situations, which leads them to identify their practices in opposition to a constructed mainstream. Thus, I typically and often apply the term “construction” to capture these processes for two reasons. First, to underscore the notion that unschoolers engage in processes through which they literally build, or construct, their countercultural identities. That is, unschoolers play a shaping role in the building of their countercultural identities and the term “construction” reminds us of their active role.

In addition, just as I take up Stephen’s culturalist perspective on childhood studies, i.e. that different discursive practices produce different childhoods that are “real” within their own truth regimes, I apply the same logic to how unschoolers produce a “mainstream” and their “alternatives” as “real” within *their* regimes of truth. The notion of a cultural “construct” reminds us, therefore, that unschoolers see and “construct” the “world” from a truth regime that their experiences and discursive practices, as socio-cultural processes, produce as quite “real” for them and are, in the end, caught up in cultural or, as is often the

case, countercultural constructs. These processes, of course, rarely proceed smoothly or without contradiction. Thus, wherever possible, I attempt to show some of the lived contradictions, conflicts, and tensions associated with cultivating unschooled children through countercultural principles and practices.

III. Methods

As the milk pours out of unlabeled plastic gallon container into my glass at 5 am, I reflect on the previous night's "field work." I'm 28 weeks pregnant with my second child and my dissertation, due in 2 weeks, is "coming along" just as rapidly as my growing belly. I picked up this tasty, if unusual milk last night from the home of the unschooling mother that I'll call here "Eve Small." The milk comes from cows that eat grass, wean when they're ready, don't get antibiotics and will not likely encounter any "mad cow" disease because the Mennonite family that runs their farm have not bought a cow in years; they're "free range." The origin of this milk is similar to the origin of the other animal products one can get from the farmer co-op to which Eve and her family belong.

While we haven't "joined" yet, I'll likely start ordering a few things and using Eve's house as a "pick up" point on the days that she picks them up from the designated spot, the garage of a house belonging to "Stacy," the friend who lives halfway to the farm and who initially turned Eve on to the virtues of un-pasturized, whole, grass-fed cow's milk. Stacy's child was diagnosed as lactose intolerant and suffered from a range of allergies until their family started using these natural products. In this way, Eve learned from Stacy, and I learned from Eve. Why did I rely on her countercultural knowledge?

Since she got involved in Stacy's co-op, Eve has "read up" and developed extensive knowledge about the range of milk production, a variety of related health and nutritional topics, as well as some of the eco-politics and political-economics of farming, agri-business, and food distribution. Eve's concerns center mostly around the health-related issues, growing from an initial interest in her own family's well-being and moving towards a gradual "public health outrage," as she puts it, which she used to reserve for the politics of breastfeeding. So, while she's quick to point out the relative cost benefits of the co-op, she also commented that, "You'll never see this kind of milk, let alone the organics, on the W.I.C.⁷ list...They're all about formulas, whether it's cows milk or for babies." Perhaps not so odd, I thought to myself, that this lactation activist has now turned into a dairy maven.

So I'll trust Eve's endorsement of the milk for now, instead of "reading up" myself. I'll also come by once weekly, to her house, where a 5 minute exchange might extend for hours once my daughter, Ella, almost five, disappears upstairs to play with "Madeline," Eve's six-year-old, only to return in costumes, or with directions for how to prepare when the house-turned-submarine "submerges," or whatever play might occupy them.

In these actions, I participated in the types of social processes through which local knowledge, subjectivities, political economies, and friendships are cultivated and shared among unschoolers and within the movement that I sought to observe and describe. I tried

⁷ W.I.C., which stands for "Women, with Infants and Children," a State-run food subsidy provision. Eve's comment reveals how she, like a number of unschoolers that I encountered, perceives social stratification in her society as well as how it influences the distribution of social and material goods. This specific remark comes from her knowledge as a lactation advocate, of the generally accepted premise that the W.I.C. program provides dis-incentives for women who receive government assistance to breastfeed. While the benefits vary across the state, in many counties, the program provides free and/or low-cost infant formulas but budget for considerably less food for (in some instances two additional cans of tuna fish per month) to subsidize the diet of a mother who chooses to breastfeed. While this is not the case in all counties, it seems fairly typical. Eve's disdainful observation that the same holds true in instances of organic milk reaffirms her construction of the "system" as unfairly stratified across economic advantage. While she shares this sense of unfairness with other unschoolers, like them, her sense of critique towards the "mainstream" presupposes first that mainstream people are similarly situated along her class lines and that the state does more to protect corporate interests (such as formula companies) than public health.

to understand how people cultivate their alternative identities through interactions with others, with texts, with experiences that challenge what they knew, but which often reinscribe their advantaged positions within the socially and economically stratified society of the United States.

Moreover, in interactions such as these, I perform the “native” anthropologist role, whether I planned to or not. For as I developed a relationship with Eve, who became a friend and a fellow traveler in parenting, she became an informant long after I thought I had “concluded” my fieldwork. As I began to write up and analyze my ethnographic data, her actions and perspectives, placed in the context of my unfolding experiences as a parent, at times confirmed and at times challenged my understandings of the lived experiences of the unschoolers that I had studied for five years before I became a parent. Like a number of chance encounters I had with unschoolers’ in my community, my kid’s play dates, even the ones where Ella was a little crankier than Madeline after a day at school, brought into high relief the temporal and spatial permeability of my “backyard” research.

* * *

As I sought to understand the ideas, practices, processes, and efforts at attaining legitimacy that go into producing unschooling as a countercultural lifestyle and as an educational movement, I encountered two related movement characteristics that posed challenges from the perspective of study design. First, unschoolers rarely live in immediate proximity to each other and instead, must often take great pains to produce or otherwise connect with a trans-local community of unschoolers; they often draw upon and develop social capital through these processes.

Second, unschoolers are, by and large, a very text-oriented and self-referential lot⁸. Many prospective and current unschooling parents (and would-be unschooled “rise-outs”⁹) read a wide a range of books and other media about unschooling, natural parenting, and community-based education. Their movement has also spawned what Stevens (2001) has aptly termed a “cottage industry” of descriptive and prescriptive discourses, particularly in the form of texts such as books, newsletters, magazines, web pages, and abundant ephemera related to unschooling and homeschooling. I initially thought of these abundant streams of texts as a treasure trove of data on unschooling practices, dispositions, and ideology; they pointed to the key issues that families and unschooling advocates have contended with over time and across the country. It was helpful to “wade” in this data stream at first, but these texts proved to be a slippery slope. From the perspective of ethnographic research, such texts, often refined and rich in description of the daily lives of families or in cogent critiques of “schooling,” beg questions about authenticity as artifacts of the movement and the extent to which they reflect and shape unschooling ideas and practices within families. These texts and the conditions that produced them brought high relief the general challenges of conducting ethnography in a “media saturated” milieu (Ortner 1998).

These conditions and concerns figured prominently as I constructed a multi-sited, polymorphously engaged¹⁰ ethnographic research design to accommodate the multiple sites

⁸ I attribute this to a number of factors, including generally ample educational capital on the part of most unschoolers, along with a strong need to find support from a trans-local community and legitimacy in the face of conventional childrearing and educational practices.

⁹ The term “rise-out” plays with the conventional and more disparaging term “drop-out” to describe teens who have elected to leave school in order to get a “real” life. Early instances of this term appear in Grace Llewellyn’s *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* and her teen-authored, *Real Lives: Eleven Teenagers Who Don’t Go to School*. (1997, 1993) both works are popular among prospective rise outs as well as parents of unschooled adolescents and pre-adolescents.

¹⁰ Gusterson explains that “polymorphous engagement” means: “...interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; and it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources and in many ways. Polymorphous engagement preserves the

and processes that unschoolers can and do engage when they experience unschooling as a distinctive and alternative education as well as a lifestyle¹¹ organized around a characteristic ethos that seeks to unite learning with “living” in the “real” world (Marcus 1995; Gupta, Ferguson et al, 1997; Gusterson 1997). Thus, I sought out unschooling in its likely places: in unschoolers’ homes, in their immediate communities, and in the wider (real and virtual) unschooling world¹². Interested in issues of cultural, educational, and legal legitimacy, I also designed a methodology that enabled me to understand how unschoolers navigate encounters with state-sanctioned educational agencies. Like the unschoolers that I encountered, I traveled back and forth through these social spaces; such movement provided multiple data streams from which to begin to understand unschooling as a countercultural lifestyle and as an educational movement.

To augment standard methods of participant observation (Bernard 1988; Peacock 1986), using open-ended interviews, (Spradley 1979) I also tracked unschoolers’ perspectives on their negotiations with the educational agents of the state.¹³ Finally, to illuminate the wider context and historical dimensions of the unschooling movement, I conducted archival research of *Growing Without Schooling* magazine in Cambridge, Massachusetts¹⁴ and I

pragmatic amateurism that has characterized anthropological research, but displaces it away from a fetishistic obsession with participant observation. (1997:116)

¹¹ As an ethnographer, I tried to take note of all of the distinctive aspects of an unschooling “lifestyle.” Over the course of my study with and of unschoolers, I became particularly attuned to how the peculiarities of time, space, talk, family life on a general level, as well as matters of home economics, gender, and the distribution of power across generations, etc., shaped a distinctive unschooling lifestyle. Thus, these aspects of lifestyle, along with the issues of legitimacy that I describe below, arose as the central concerns of my study.

¹² The online world of unschooling informed my understanding of the lifeworlds of the people in my study. However, mine was not an anthropology of an online community (c.f. Wilson and Peterson 2002).

¹³ I had hoped to interview many agents of the state to see *their* perspectives on how unschoolers meet the state’s requirements. However, I was only able to interview one such agent, an assistant superintendent of one of the districts local to many of my informants. She offered a singular (and therefore unreliable) perspective on the work of regulating homeschooling. She illuminated how some school officials and their staffs conduct their work in assessing the portfolios and other documents that homeschooling families produce in compliance with the state.

¹⁴ In an effort to understand the history of the unschooling movement, I visited Holt Associates, publishers of

interviewed key speakers and authors who serve as the public or “organic” intellectuals of the unschooling world¹⁵ (Spradley 1979; Bernard 1988). While I do not describe these data streams in the text of my study, they deeply informed my understanding of unschoolers’ countercultural principles and practices.

A. Finding Unschoolers

In my four years of periodic fieldwork during graduate school and then later in a year dedicated to intensive participant observation, I learned what unschooling, specifically “natural,” “learner-centered,” and “community-based” learning that “takes children seriously,” entails on a daily basis. I studied the lifestyles of unschooling families: how they allocate their time and resources as they engage people, projects, books, and other materials as well as make sense of those practices and of themselves as countercultural practitioners. When I conducted research with what seem to be representative unschooling families, I specifically attended to “lifestyle” issues, such as use of time, space, language, embodiment,

GWJ and a clearinghouse for support and information on unschooling, headquartered in Cambridge, MA in 1998, where the staff, editor, and publisher graciously offered their time and insights. My archival research also entailed several visits to the Monroe C. Guttman library at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, which houses the only complete public collection of *GWJ*.

¹⁵ Here I borrow the term “organic intellectuals” loosely from Antonio Gramsci, as it encapsulates the articulatory role of the acolytes of the unschooling movement (authors, conference speakers, and unschooling advocates) as well as the relationship to the population of unschoolers from which they often emerge and whose interests they serve. Yet, I recognize that Gramsci was centrally concerned with class consciousness and suggested that organic intellectuals emerge from the same “class” as their audiences (Gramsci 1971:6). In the case of unschooling, it is noteworthy that many such organic intellectuals were not unschoolers. Among these non-parents or non-unschoolers who nevertheless play or played shaping roles in the movement are the late John Holt, education reformer, prolific author and founder of *Growing Without Schooling (GWJ)* magazine, who many unschoolers call the “grandfather” of unschooling, Susannah Sheffer, unschooling advocate, author and longtime editor of *GWJ*, Jean Leidloff, advocate for attachment parenting and author of the *Continuum Concept* and John Taylor Gatto, who, as a critic of compulsory education, is a popular author among unschoolers and often speaks at unschooling conferences. Yet, by and large, other unschooling organic intellectuals, more aptly characterized in a stricter Gramscian sense of the term as having emerged from the population of unschoolers, include an array of author-advocates whose work, speeches, and workshops are well-known among unschoolers. These acolytes tend to write about their unschooling experiences from a personal perspective that often simultaneously critiques conventional education (c.f. Wallace, Colfax, Farenga, Heuer, Waldron, White, Moran, Cohen, Albert). They frequently become popular speakers and workshop leaders at unschooling conferences. I interviewed and corresponded with nine of these organic intellectuals. Their work, along with these interactions, provided me a wider purchase on the history and ideologies of the unschooling movement.

consumption, and family dynamics, such as home economics and interactional styles within families (specifically, gender and age).

My fieldwork began in the summer of 1998, when a pre-fieldwork research grant¹⁶ facilitated my ability to “map” the terrain of the homeschooling scenes in the United States according to the various types of actors, practices, and ideologies that produce them. This work enabled me to situate my study of unschoolers in the wider context of homeschooling in the United States.¹⁷ It also helped to lay the groundwork for later research, as I developed contacts (and conduct initial interviews) within a representational network of unschoolers in the metropolitan area of a city in the Northeastern United States. It also accorded me a sense that this geographic area, replete with suburban, rural and urban settings, accorded me an opportunity to meet a representative sampling of the unschoolers. Many of the unschoolers in this area comprised a local public sphere or discourse community (c.f. Habermas 1974, 1996; Urban 1993). They were, thus, helpful for snowball sampling (Maxwell 1996).

As a benefit of conducting fieldwork in the community where I lived, I managed to sustain these contacts throughout my graduate studies. I regularly visited the homes of a number of unschooling families to hang out as well as conduct interviews and video analysis while I worked out methodological and theoretical issues that emerged through course work

¹⁶ This fieldwork was funded through an anonymous donor to the Anthropology Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

¹⁷ Specifically, I conducted comparative research between Christian homeschooling and unschooling by attending some of the organized gatherings of both movements. I traveled first to Sacramento, CA for a five-day “conference,” or a gathering of one of the county’s largest Christian Home Education associations. I then traveled to suburban Massachusetts for “*GLWS* 25” the 25th-anniversary conference and celebration of *Growing Without Schooling* magazine. At both conferences, people circulated descriptive and prescriptive discourses about their respective homeschooling practices and ideologies, along with a strong sense of historicity, or active and polemical historical constructions (c.f. Trouillot 1995). Historicity was a particularly prominent element at the *GLWS* 25 conference, as it featured many retrospective tributes to the unschooling movement and its leadership.

and other research venues. I also volunteered weekly for two half-year sessions (one semester each fall in 1998 and 2000) as one of three adult facilitators for a morning “open” program at a resource center for unschooled children and their families in the metropolitan area in which I conducted my research. Such resource centers, some formal and others informal co-ops seem common and increasing in the unschooling movement. In addition to creating opportunities to network with unschooling families, my varied encounters within the community affiliated with this resource center accorded me an additional vantage point on unschooling practices and ideologies generally, as well as specific prescriptions about how to speak and interact with unschooled children.

By the close of my fieldwork in August 2001, I had, in all, visited the homes and joined in the activities of twenty-two unschooling families, where I spent a minimum of three hours and more often, full days that began at breakfast and ended prior to bedtime activities in order to conduct thirty-six, open-ended, ethnographic interviews¹⁸ and to take concurrent field notes. I taped and selectively transcribed twenty-four of these interviews. In addition, I took notes on the plethora of serendipitous encounters with unschoolers in seemingly unlikely places, such as supermarkets and in my training and work as a childbirth instructor, and in more likely places, such as unschooling-oriented activities. These informal interviews broadened, and at times deepened, my understanding of unschoolers and their countercultural principles and practices.

I repeatedly visited nine of these families and sustained an ongoing presence in the lives of five of them, joining them on a routine basis (sometimes for stretches of days and,

¹⁸ I offer a note on temporality and taping. While a full third of these interviews were conducted in a fluid start-to-finish manner, ranging from approximately sixty to ninety minutes, many of these interviews took all day to complete. I would generally start at the kitchen table with one parent and would take breaks to accommodate their immediate needs to attend to their homes. Often, I would begin to participate in the activities of some or all of the family members, to return to taped interviewing whenever possible.

more often than not, on a weekly basis) in their activities throughout (and after) the ethnographic fieldwork period from June 2000 through August 2001. I purposefully chose these informant families to accommodate the widest possible range of unschooling practices, but I also took into account their willingness to welcome me into their daily lives for over a “school” year (Maxwell 1996: 70-73).¹⁹,

To contextualize my participant observations and interviews, I read many of the books, magazines, websites, and list serves that discussed unschooling recommended by my key informants. These media clued me in to the discourses, philosophies, expressive practices, and history that distinguished the unschooling movement. I also joined my key informant families and other unschoolers as they attended local, regional, and national unschooling conferences. These sites of interaction generated additional streams of data (discourses, texts, and ephemera) from which to understand unschooling as a countercultural lifestyle and educational movement.

B. Finding Unschoolers As They Find Each Other

Countercultural participation necessarily entails the development of a countercultural identity (Cox 1995, 1996). Given that people develop their identities through social settings with like-minded, like-practicing others (c.f. Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), one of the ways that I attended to this development was to see the types of supports that unschoolers cultivated together. Because unschoolers often experience a general lack of support in their

¹⁹ Most unschoolers subscribe to the credo that “learning takes place all the time,” and often scoff at the concept of a conventional school calendar. September through June (the “school calendar” months in this region of the United States) were nevertheless significant to my informant families, as these were the months for which they were accountable in their dealings with the commonwealth’s educational authorities. In point of fact, the PA homeschooling statute called for 180 days of instruction (24 PS 13-1327). Most families, nevertheless, found it easiest to work within the conventional school calendar. Either they did so out of convention or to ease their dealings with local education officials. Many parents, for example, kept accounts of their family’s activities that held greater detail during these “school months” than the other months.

local communities, those instances in which they gather together produced crucibles for understanding how they developed supports (ideological, practical, emotional, pedagogical, and social) for their practices and cultivated their countercultural identities. I participated and observed at as many of these unschooler-oriented events as possible, and attended to the practices and meaning-making activities of the participating unschoolers. These group events ranged from informal gatherings, such as coffee klatches and potluck dinners for parents, to more activity-focused gatherings, such as play dates, science co-ops, or families working together at a food pantry, to highly-structured, annual or one-time conferences of state-wide or national unschooling associations.

These conferences included the three-day Twentieth Anniversary celebration of *GW/S* outside of Boston in June, 1997 as well as four of the annual conferences of the New Jersey Unschoolers Network, a long-standing event regional to the Northeast United States that attracts an average crowd of three-hundred fifty unschooling families and a range of popular speakers.²⁰ My participant observation over the course of these events provided me with several-dozen short interviews with unschooling parents, children, and community organizers, as well as vendors and people who provide services to unschoolers such as librarians, museum educators, etc. In addition, these events provided me entrée to formal and informal interviews (as well as ongoing correspondence, in a few cases) with a number of the unschooling movement's "public intellectuals." Again, while these data do not show

²⁰ I have evidently become one of these popular speakers. In the interest of disclosure, reflexivity, fact checking, and further data gathering, I have sought out occasions to share with unschoolers what I learned about unschooling. After I presented my findings and conducted a workshop/group interview on community-building in June 2001, I was twice invited to return as a presenter. In September 2003, I conducted another workshop on unschooling and community-based activities and was slated to facilitate a discussion of unschooling home economics in 2004 when illness befell my family. As a self-conscious constituency, unschoolers were generally curious about my research (particularly after they learned that I was an anthropologist and not an "educationist"); many expressed an interest in reading "my book." In addition, four unschoolers have read and provided feedback on various aspects of my work.

up descriptively in this text, they inform how I understand and characterize unschoolers' perspectives and of the workings of their countercultural community.

C. Reading Unschooling: Wading in a Sea of Text

A common joke among unschoolers that “every fifth unschooling mom has a book out!” reveals that their movement has produced extensive and variegated fields of discourse – across a range of media. For most current and developing unschoolers, and for those interested in getting a sense of what unschooling entails, these media provide official discourses along with a mirror onto unschooling practices and principles. In addition to several foundational books, particularly those authored by John Holt and a few books that do not incorporate the wider audience (i.e., they draw upon the observations of a fixed author or authors), much of the media of the unschooling movement highlights multi-authored work that, alongside strong editorial voices, includes the readership in its authorship. These media have evolved over time to include local newsletters, the now defunct magazine *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS), and a range of niche websites –all geared to provide ideological and practical support as well as a wider sense of unschooling *communitas* (see appendix, “Immersion Readings.”)

I carefully read the books, newsletters, and websites that repeatedly appeared within informants' homes as well as those that unschooling parents cited as influential to their thinking. While I have read many other issues of GWS²¹ and *Home Education* magazine, I limited those that I coded for analysis for this study to the bi-monthly issues of GWS concurrent to my research in June 2000-July 2001, as these were the materials

²¹ Notable for the self-conscious construction of this phenomenon as a social movement, Holt Associates, publishers of the now-defunct journal, put out a bound compendium of the first twelve issues of GWS, subtitled “A record of a grass-roots movement.”

contemporaneously available to the unschooling families in my study. I considered this data interesting in both the vivid (if not well-edited) depictions of daily life and the sensibilities (often overtly ideological positions) that these texts offer potential and current unschoolers. I also considered the ways in which these two purposes mingled within the texts and, thereby, played a meaningful role in the lives of the unschooling families in my study.

D. Methods of Understanding Unschooling and Legitimacy

I addressed issues of legal legitimacy in a separate chapter because they surfaced in relative isolation to the other major aspects of unschooling life. This is the case, perhaps, because, as Bourdieu observed when considering the bourgeois in France (and unschoolers, by and large, fit in among the analogous educated middle classes in the United States), the state has become irrelevant in valorizing their educational capital (Bourdieu 1996). This explains my relatively early insight that for most unschoolers, their dealings with the state were punctuated on the calendar as general irritants or the occasional sources of stress,²² but were relatively insignificant to their daily lives. Still, I felt that these encounters deserved consideration for several reasons. First, they were significant at the grossest level of legal legitimacy. For without successfully navigating them, a family might jeopardize their ability to continue unschooling. Furthermore, how unschoolers manage these encounters brings into high relief the ways in which their relatively ample educational, social, and, at times, economic capital proves salient in whether their unschooling proved a viable countercultural practice. Thus, with regards to legal legitimacy, I sought out the specific sites and processes

²² For example, while families were generally non-chalant about state requirements, several parents described moments in their neophyte days as unschoolers that included “freaking out” when faced with the need to produce affidavits and educational plans to submit to their local school districts or when they needed to “scrounge” for unschooling-friendly evaluators. Such instances illuminate the significance of social capital for unschoolers, as they reveal the ways in which local networks shape how unschoolers not only navigate their encounters with the state, but also develop dispositions that reflect a general ease in those dealings. I take up this topic in greater detail in chapter eight.

that proved significant and therefore paid considerable attention to how unschoolers navigate their state-mandated assessments.

To these ends, I asked every family that I encountered about how they handled state requirements. I also conducted participant observation at one conference workshop entitled “staying legal” and a similarly oriented support-group session among neophyte and experienced unschoolers. At these gatherings, parents shared ideas, dispositions, and strategies to deal with state agents and requirements. I also asked about and observed how families produced their annual assessment portfolios. In addition to reviewing the collection of portfolios and affidavits of five of the families in my study, I serendipitously chanced upon two sessions during which families prepared their annual portfolios. These activities provided me a privileged vantage on how unschoolers make sense of, and strategize to meet, the state’s requirements of all homeschoolers in light of the ostensible incompatibility between unschooling principles and practices, and a conventional educational curriculum.

To understand the inverse of those processes, i.e., how “evaluation” works, and, more to the point, how agents of the state make sense of unschooling, I sought out interactions with and the perspectives of those who served the state’s interests in homeschooling. These official activities were less accessible, however, as districts local to the unschoolers in my study had different, and at times less transparent, policies for portfolio review. I did manage to interview one assistant superintendent, who shed some light on how her district dealt with their local homeschoolers and their portfolios. In addition, I was privileged to accompany a nine-year-old unschooler and his mother to their year-end assessment—a portfolio review and an interview with their evaluator. She, in turn, offered me an impromptu interview about her role and her perspective as mediator between

the interests of the state and the unschooling and other homeschooling families in her client base. To verify my understandings of this perspective, I interviewed two other state-licensed evaluators about how they conducted and considered their work.

I studied real people, in the real world, in my own society, an endeavor that poses a number of the ethical issues inherent to “native” anthropology (Stevens 2001; *CITES on US research*), some of which I detail below, whereas others I leave out or modify due to privacy concerns. To address the latter, I altered the identities of virtually all of the people whom I write about. I changed all names and at times merged the identities of several of my informants into character types. Moreover, because homeschooling is an increasingly public movement, certain dimensions of privacy were hard to retain. Thus, all citations to the public domain and quotations from them use the actual names of authors. For better or worse, these ethnographic methods provided the basis of my understanding and depiction of unschoolers and their countercultural enterprise. As much as possible, I have tried to bring forth the voices of the unschoolers who were generous enough to bring me into their lives.

Coda: Learning what's at Stake: The Dialectics of Research, Parenting, and Backyard Fieldwork

Qualitative research is not primarily concerned with eliminating variance between researchers in the values and expectations they bring to the study, but with understanding how a particular researcher's values influence the conduct and conclusions of the study....As Fred Hess phrased it, validity in qualitative research is not the result of indifference, but of integrity

(Maxwell 1996:91).

“Things must seem so clear to you. Wait until you have kids! Then you'll know what's really at stake”

(Vanessa Fields, unschooling mother of three, 7/20/98).

In June 2001, I presented my preliminary findings to an audience of about forty unschooling parents and teens at the New Jersey Unschoolers Network Conference. Fifteen minutes into my talk, my then 4-month old daughter, Ella, began to fuss inconsolably in her father's arms. Not missing a beat, I opened my jacket, put her sling over my shoulder, took her from his arms, and popped her into the pouch of the sling. She nursed to sleep quickly and discreetly and I wore her for the remainder of my talk. This demonstration of maternal connection during work did not undermine my credibility with this audience as it might at an academic conference. Evidently, it instead endeared me to these unschoolers, marking my legitimacy amidst their community.²³ For it confirmed that I had gotten a major part of the unschooling story correct.

As an anthropologist, I took it as my duty to try to understand what it means to move through the world as an unschooler would. After spending time with unschooled families and wading through the materials available to them through the unschooling public sphere, I learned how to talk about education and parenting as well as to interact with children as an unschooler might. Initially, I had little difficulty studying and understanding these processes analytically.

Nevertheless, my first experience with unschoolers as a movement sent me reeling. A weekend of non-stop contact with them at the 1998 *Growing Without Schooling* 25th Anniversary conference steeped me in the intensely passionate discourses that emerge when

²³ In fact, one of the attendees told my husband that I was her "hero" for demonstrating (evidently in front of her teenaged daughter), that women can simultaneously work and nurture their children. When I joined them, however, she lamented her sense of the incompatibility of most work environments with mothering. I obliquely address the related topics of the economics of "natural" parenting and including children in the world of work in contemporary America, in chapters four and six.

the unschooling faithful gather to reaffirm their lifestyle and worldview.²⁴ Immersed in a cauldron of unschooling discourses intensely critical of “systems of expertise,” “consumerism,” “ageism,” and an altogether different sense of what constituted the good life from what I was accustomed to, I experienced in some part the radical re-visioning necessary to understand an unschooling perspective. This was the “culture shock” of my fieldwork experience, for it jarred me out of my comfortable understanding of the workings of different interests (such as families, communities, and wider society, including “the state”) in the business of raising educated people. Continued graduate coursework accorded me with the opportunity to put some of these unschooling perspectives in dialogue with the various issues and analytic perspectives in my field before embarking on a more sustained ethnography with unschoolers.

Through gradual immersion in the unschooling world, I eventually learned to “speak” and perform unschooler as one learns to get by in a second language. I noted how this language revealed the existential challenges unschoolers faced as they raised their families in ways that departed significantly from their own upbringing as well as how their friends and neighbors behaved. They were often delighted with my intense interest in how they lived their lives and my efforts to interact with their children in ways that showed that I understood how to “take children seriously,” as many put it. Nevertheless, some informants, usually mothers, expressed a sense that I might not *get it* since I was not a mother myself. As one unschooling mother of three, Vanessa Fields joked, “Things must seem so clear to you. Wait until you have kids. Then you’ll get what’s at stake here!”

²⁴ See Wallace 1956 for an early anthropological perspective on the revitalizing role of the gathering of the faithful in social movements.

--My Maternal Double-Consciousness and the Dialectics of "What's at Stake"

As the vignette at the beginning of this section suggests, I became a parent during this project.²⁵ The dialectic between my parenting and my research has given me a unique purchase on the data that I gleaned from my ethnographic work with unschoolers. As Vanessa predicted, I developed a new appreciation for what is "at stake" for unschoolers in terms both existential and practical dilemmas. My early practices as a parent, which were certainly influenced by my research, also enabled me to understand more deeply the connections between unschoolers' parenting practices, their sense of children, and their pedagogies. Herein lay my "special claims" and specific subjectivities as a researcher.²⁶

Of course, this dialectic at times caused me to pause, if not stumble, in my analysis. I knew that many other anthropologists bring home some of the practices and dispositions that they learned through their field work, but I nevertheless worried that my research unduly transformed how I approached my work as an anthropologist and as a parent. Ultimately, my shifting parental status and identity mattered not simply as a bolster to my credibility with informants, but because it produced in me a maternal-double consciousness, which heightened some and likely dulled other sensitivities to some of the issues involved in my study.

²⁵ My daughter, Ella, was born mid-way through my "research year" of intense ethnographic engagement with unschoolers (from June 2000-August 2001). Owing to significant preliminary research prior to that year (one of the benefits of domestic ethnography), which began as far back as 1997, I had learned much about unschooling prior to parenting. Yet, much of my analytic work, the insights that I developed about unschooling during fieldwork and since "leaving" the field (a problem I consider in the sections below), have taken place as I have become a parent.

²⁶ I recognize that I am treading on a quasi-maternalist ground, but I see this path as unavoidable. As many anthropologists have lately concluded, subjectivity influences how we gather and come to understand our data. Another researcher with different positionalities, or who did not have children, or who had children before going in to the project, or who did not parent in the way that my husband and I parented our daughter, would have a different study altogether. They would have gathered different data and would have made different connections from the data. Certainly, though her or his conclusions would have been different, they would have been, nonetheless, equally valid.

The most obvious influence of parenting on my research had to do with data-gathering. My pregnant belly, and later my in-arms baby, served as a powerful data magnet. Unschoolers shared with me their ideas about child rearing, not only for the sake of my research but also because, like many other people, they treated pregnancy and babies as invitations for advice. I listened intensely, took good notes, and treated every bit of it as “data” about unschoolers, often discounting the extent to which this advice and other aspects of my work with unschoolers influenced how my husband and I parented our daughter, Ella.

Specifically, we departed from our reserved upbringings and practiced what contemporary books call an “attachment” style parenting, common (but not necessarily unique) to unschoolers. After a few challenges from others to our style of parenting, I came to understand more deeply the ways in which these encounters affect unschoolers. Like unschooling, the attachment parenting practices of co-sleeping, breastfeeding on cue, and keeping babies “in-arms” (usually in a sling), seem to undermine childrearing conventions in the United States. These practices can consign parents into countercultural positions. I realized that these experiences heighten unschoolers’ sense of distinction and set the stage for their countercultural identities. I, at times, wondered just how far departed from the “mainstream” I had become, particularly as I became an educator in natural childbirth and encountered others in that world who seek to challenge biomedical approaches to birth.

From these parenting experiences, I also developed a new understanding of how unschoolers’ ideas about “nature” pervade the relationship between parenting and pedagogy. For example, I had a different take on Jean Leidloff’s *The Continuum Concept* when I re-read it at the goading of an informant during my post-partum period. Years ago a mother at an

unschooling conference referenced this work to explain her own unschooling philosophy as “keeping your children close until they’re ready to wiggle away.” Leidloff’s romanticized description of Yaquanna peoples as “stone age” primitives clued me in to how Leidloff, and many unschoolers in suit, primitivized indigenous people in order to assert their claims about nature. Yet, Leidloff’s ideas about keeping babies in the sling, where they “needed” to be (near the breast and the parent’s heartbeat) and including them in the “real” life of (what I now read metaphorically as) the “village” struck a chord for me as a new parent. I consequently focused on Leidloff’s work as a conduit to understanding the ways that unschoolers marshal claims about “nature” to guide and justify their behaviors towards children.

I returned to full-time fieldwork (with Ella in tow) with a heightened sensitivity to Leidloff’s influence. I conversed about it with unschoolers, took another look at their bookcases (if they owned it, they often shelved Leidloff’s book in the “parenting” sections of their collections rather than in the “homeschooling” areas) and noted how Leidloff’s ideas cropped up in many homeschooling and unschooling magazines. I discovered that many unschoolers were profoundly influenced by Leidloff’s work, whether directly (by reading it), indirectly (through their interactions with other attachment-oriented parents and other unschoolers), or through the discourses availed them through the movement. Thus, in my analysis, I emphasize Jean Leidloff’s grand-maternal role in the unschooling movement where others have focused more heavily upon John Holt’s seminal influence.²⁷

²⁷ See Stevens (2001) for foci on Holt. I do not discount Holt’s influence on the unschooling movement but instead shift the focus to Leidloff as her ideas reflect unschoolers’ lifestyles and the ways in which they often legitimate their practices. Holt and Leidloff were aware of and promoted each others’ work. Holt, for example reviewed *The Continuum Concept* in *GWJ*, and his endorsement appears on the back of the book, “If ever a book could change the world, this would be it”

Conversely, instances where I parted paths²⁸ with how unschoolers parent also heightened my understanding of theirs as a distinctive lifestyle. Once I concluded fieldwork and could no longer include my daughter in my work, I developed a better sense of unschoolers' attempts to include children in the "real world" as a privileged and deeply countercultural proposition. My informants' telling responses to Ella's enrollment in preschool so that I could teach and write heightened this understanding. One mother lamented, "That's such a long time for a two-year-old to be away from you. What a shame!" Other informants took great pains to develop an idiom of "needs" that moved beyond nature and towards class, "Well, she really needs your full attention when you *are* with her," one mother sighed. Offering a more directly classist commentary, along with the assumption that I felt guilty about my choices, another unschooling mother offered, "Sometimes kids don't understand [that] their families have economic needs. She'll be okay." For these mothers, such "explanations" provided a comfortable justification for the otherwise inexplicable choice of other-, non-familial-, care. Such responses underscored the role of maternalist language and ideology in unschooling that became the leitmotif of my study.

These encounters resonated with materials in my field notes (and the popular and research depictions of unschooling as a middle-class, suburban phenomenon) to confirm my sense that unschooling, and how unschoolers seek to legitimate it, has as much to do with

²⁸ Ours was not a full departure, as I suspect my research with unschoolers influenced the type of preschool that we selected. All of the talk about the natural learning that kids do through their bodies, the imprint in my mind's eye of nearly two years' worth of scenes of children just hanging out barefoot, upside-down, and moving about while someone read to them --made me leery of an environment that would force Ella to sit down when she wanted to stand. Having watched unschooled children's bodies in constant motion gave me a jaundiced eye towards many of the nursery school classrooms that I visited. I suspect that it was spending time with unschooling families, who organize their lives so that their children can "learn through their bodies," that caused me to cringe when I saw the footprints painted on one nursery room floor, where all children must line up before going out to play. If unschooling is an embodied practice for children, then learning about it must have influenced my aesthetic sense about environments for children. We thus selected a Montessori environment, in which such dimensions of overt bodily control seemed minimized at the time.

lifestyle as with education. These hunches and experiences thus prompted me to re-visit theories about lifestyle and its influence in education, and, in part, shaped or heightened my analysis of unschoolers and their countercultural movement. In these ways, my understandings of unschooling and unschoolers have evolved with my own identities as a researcher, an educator, a citizen, and a parent. It is through these interlocking lenses that I bring forth the ethnographic depictions and analysis that follow.

Ch. 2: Locating Unschooling

When unschoolers describe themselves to non-homeschoolers, they often indicate merely that they “homeschool.” Yet this label serves as shorthand for outsiders that belies the distinctiveness of their practices and identities. Unschooling has emerged as a distinctive countercultural movement in its own right and with respect to the wider homeschooling movement in the United States. In this chapter, I locate the unschooling movement as countercultural movement in American society and on the American educational landscape. I detail what distinguishes unschoolers as a population and with respect to other developments in education, specifically with respect to other homeschoolers. This chapter provides the wider context from which to understand my informants and their practices.

Distinctively Unschoolers

One early summer morning, eight year-old Laurie Martin-Biggley, who had never been to school, accompanied her mother, Elizabeth Martin, to the building site of their future home. Elizabeth needed to consult with the contractor so she handed Laurie a pack of playing cards. Laurie’s “grand-pappy” had recently bestowed these cards with much ceremony after teaching her how to play solitaire during a visit to his nursing home. Later that morning, Elizabeth found Laurie seated on a wooden stool at a table, engrossed in her card game. Having found no other suitable place to play that protected the prized cards, Laurie had rummaged through the wood pile, borrowed a saw, hammer, and nails from the amused but ultimately impressed workers, and built for herself a rudimentary stool and card table.

This vignette, which shows a young person engaged in self-directed work, provides a quintessential example of the activities and values of unschoolers like Laurie and her family. Laurie built the table and chair on her own initiative, without instruction, and for her own

purposes. Furthermore, she stopped working when she was satisfied with the results. She solved the self-imposed problem of finding a flat surface to play with and protect her cards by drawing on her familiarity with carpentry and her family's penchant for "problem solving."

Unschooling families eschew both conventional schooling and (unique among homeschoolers) formal curriculum in favor of a lifestyle that they believe "takes their children seriously" (this was something I often heard said in those words) by allowing them to spend their days learning "naturally" through participation in the "real world." Unschoolers take this as both a matter of pedagogy --a belief that people learn best when they do something for their own purposes-- and of philosophy—they emphasize children's volitional nature. Moreover, they regard young people as the primary stakeholders in their own activities and treat them as the locus of authority in evaluating their own work.

I heard Laurie's story repeated twice over six months as it circulated around her family's unschooling community. I first overheard it at a July swim party, several weeks after it occurred. After three months away, the Martin-Bigleys missed the tight-knit unschooling community, which they had for years drawn upon for and shared philosophical, emotional, and pedagogical support. Elizabeth frequently phoned Evelyn Richards, a long-standing leader in the community and host of the party, with family updates. Evelyn recounted Laurie's story not only to apprise interested friends at the party but also to assure those within earshot just how well unschooled children can turn out.

This form of storytelling resembled a ritual performance, which I witnessed dozens of times as I interacted with unschoolers in groups. With its reassuring characterization of a child as the central and heroic figure, Laurie's story was the type of tale that unschoolers

circulated within their local and extra-local discourse communities. They used such stories to reassure each other of the soundness of their alternative educational practices. The stories typically downplayed the role of the adults in children's activities. Such stories (re-affirm for unschoolers their shared belief that children can competently work with real tools to create real things and should have as much access to the world around them as possible.

Parents who share in common the unfolding goal of raising "unschooled" children -- a distinctive type of educated person that reflects unschoolers' priorities of self-direction, flexible thinking, and collaboration in community life-- are producing a generally coherent and alternative set of worldviews and practices that insiders and outsiders (especially those in the homeschooling movement that do not unschool) alike refer to as the "unschooling movement." I see this movement as countercultural because it is as much about lifestyle as it is about education and because this alternative movement simultaneously challenges and re-inscribes some of the basic processes and assumptions of schooling and what unschoolers perceive as mainstream lifestyle in America.

What, then, distinguishes unschooling? Like other homeschoolers, unschooling parents feel that conventional schooling does not offer what they want in terms of educational or social development for their children, families, or communities. However, unlike other homeschoolers, unschoolers employ a radically learner-centered set of educational beliefs and practices. Unschooling parents seek to "take [their] children seriously" by encouraging them to learn in a "natural" and autonomous manner, through "real world" experiences. These parents treat their children's activities as intrinsically valuable and therefore private; most unschoolers consider evaluation --whether in the form of adult commentary or standardized testing-- as disruptive to learning. However,

recognizing the inevitability of testing and other forms of assessment, they find myriad ways to comply with state-sanctioned institutional interests in their children's education.

Unschooling families engage in a wide array of pursuits. For example, a family of unschoolers might garden or build an ant farm instead of or in addition to reading about the life cycle of plants and ants from a textbook. They might spend an afternoon knitting hats at a local homeless shelter after a morning in which they constructed a birdhouse, baked bread and read aloud under a tree at a local park. Owing to their typically high degree of educational capital and facility with the mores of conventional education, most unschooling parents could describe these practices as lessons in the sciences, crafts, language arts, social justice, or other systems of knowledge. Yet as unschoolers, they more often emphasize the integrated nature of what they often term their children's "work." Most unschoolers insist that their activities allow their children to learn hands-on in the "real world" of family and community life.

Speaking in terms of "learning by doing," they would explain that an unschooled child becomes a gardener or a knitter or an activist for homeless people *today* as s/he participates in family and community life. In contrast, they deem "schoolish" those approaches to children's activity that focus on abstractions and prepare children for a too-distant future. Yet, families interested in and capable of valorizing gardening, knitting, and similar practices as part of a legitimate "educational" (though not necessarily vocational) career for their children express the privileges that accompany ample amounts of some combination of financial, educational, cultural, and social capital.

Furthermore, even as unschooling parents draw upon these forms of capital to produce a cogent critique of conventional education and its system of credentialing, they are

nevertheless entrenched within that system and its definitions of an educated person. For example, although unschooled young people often find idiosyncratic and non-traditional routes to higher education, their families generally presuppose college as a likely and achievable destination.²⁹ Thus, even as unschoolers practice a distinctive and alternative approach to education, which they often proclaim subverts the system that distributes educational capital differentially across American society, they and the movement they produce nevertheless draw significantly from that system; by making university a goal, they reproduce an important aspect of its credentialing role. Hence, as an alternative movement, unschooling has become a viable --if only partially realized-- enacted critique of “schooling” within the dominant educational infrastructure in America.

Unschooling As A Challenge To The Lifestyle Of Schooling In America

Laurie and unschooled kids like her fit in squarely with Americans’ love for tales about craftiness and ingenuity. Yet, if Laurie taps into pervasive American mythologies about independence and innovation, she and the lifestyle she leads also gristle the reality of what most young (particularly middle class) girls in America do with their time and energies. Most American children and their immediate families live out lives organized around the routines, practices, and mores of schooling, which unschooling parents critique and to which they seek out alternatives. In this way, unschoolers live lifestyles distinct not only from what they perceive as the mainstream but also from other homeschoolers. Their lifestyles occupy

²⁹Like other homeschoolers, unschoolers are going to college at rates comparable to or higher than their conventionally schooled counterparts (Cohen 1997). The growing number of publications and workshops in the unschooling movement that focus on college admissions, specifically preparing transcripts, portfolios and other materials reveals a widespread pre-occupation with college among unschoolers. Furthermore, a growing discourse in this movement circulates among parents and grown-up unschoolers about what it means when unschooled young people chose to *not* go to college. (c.f. Cohen 1997, Heuer 2000).

distinctive childrearing practices, mores for interaction, cadences, spaces, consumption habits, uses of community resources and modes of legitimation from their schooled counterparts.

Yet, the mores of schooling pervade American culture. For in the last century and a half, schools and schooling have become one of the central institutions of modernity. They mediate not only the processes whereby most people are defined as more or less educated, but also many aspects and relationships of family, community and economic life. In this sense, schools have become rationalizing institutions, which have “colonized the lifeworld” by mediating between the interests of the state/economy and the level of daily experience (Habermas 1981). In the daily and cultural lives of Americans, the value of schools and schooling has become deeply embedded common sense.

Thus, unschooling and the people who practice it, like the Martin-Bigleys, simultaneously embody and violate the common sense of schooling; their unschooling lifestyles instead produce something of an alternative to schooling, writ large. Living on the cultural and educational margins, their activities compel them to draw upon considerable amounts of educational, social, and (at times) economic capital. Unschoolers thus complicate the ideas, practices, and lifestyles that generally produce people in America as more, or less, “educated.”

Yet, as stories from the lives of grown-up unschoolers illustrate, unschoolers often return from the margins of American education and lifestyle once they reach adulthood. Drawing upon a variety of forms of capital, which most unschoolers enjoy in some (often ample) combination, allows unschoolers to live out a critique of what they construe as the

mainstream system of education and at the same time position themselves and their children favorably within that system.

Unschooling As An Exemplary Alternative Lifestyle Movement

In this sense, unschooling is very much like other countercultural movements of people, ideas, and practices, which target “culture” and daily life more so than the state as their objects, and which reveal problems and contradictions in collective (if grassroots) efforts towards social change (Cox 1995; 1996 Melucci 1985; 1989; 1994). In particular, these alternative lifestyle movements hold out the potential to subvert the “establishment” and produce new possibilities through enacted critiques of their notions of mainstream institutions. Yet countercultural developments such as voluntary simplicity, alternative health and similar lifestyle movements, which call into question the sensibilities and practices of institutions such as the credit economy and medicine, frequently emerge from and (re-) produce inequitably distributed forms of cultural and other types of capital (c.f. Grigsby 2004).

Unschooling similarly reflects a dual reality of innovation and retrenchment, often manifest in other lifestyle movements. From this vantage point, the relatively successful³⁰ unschooling movement in the United States is both a quirky alternative educational movement and a significant instance of new developments in parental choice in education. Moreover as countercultural lifestyle movement, it illustrates an alternative and, at times,

³⁰Certainly a subjective concept, the term “success” here applies in three ways. First, unschoolers tend to describe their own activities as successful on many counts. Furthermore, they point to the generally high rate of college acceptances for unschoolers as one such marker of success. The duration of the movement, which originated in its current form in the early 1970s, illustrates another form of success or viability for those who engage with it. Finally, unschoolers are part of a wider population of homeschoolers, who tend to test above average on standardized tests as well as other forms of assessment, such as social development. In these senses, unschooling is arguably as successful as other educational choices available to Americans.

critical development in family, economic and community life in America. Despite the relatively small and demographically specific number of families that comprise this movement, the unschooling movement provides insights into an alternative route to the achievement of a fundamental goal of contemporary societies: the education of the next generation.

Unschooling In The Homeschooling World

--What's In A Name?

In a hotel banquet hall, crowded on a Sunday morning with parents, adolescents, nursing babies, a few toddlers and an anthropologist, David Colfax, a former Berkeley sociology professor turned homesteader and homeschooling father of four approached the podium. Colfax and his wife Mikki had spent the weekend talking about their latest book, Hard Times in Paradise, sequel to their best-selling book Homeschooling For Excellence. Together the books recounted their family's adventures in unschooling and homesteading on a northern California ranch. At this plenary session, the Colfaxes were two of several featured panelists of acclaimed unschoolers—these organic intellectuals of the movement³¹ who gathered that morning to share advice and anecdotes about their unschooling experiences. This plenary session was the last event of a four-day long gathering of unschoolers. The conference was a particularly large event as it marked the 20th anniversary of

³¹The Colfaxes were among many of the organic intellectuals of the unschooling movement --a term that I borrow loosely from Antonio Gramsci who described leaders that emerged from a particular class, as some of these authors, conference speakers and advocates are not necessarily from the same 'class' as their audiences (Gramsci 1971:6). Noteworthy among these non-unschooling parents who are nevertheless key in the unschooling movement are the late John Holt, education reformer and founder of *Growing Without Schooling* magazine, who many unschoolers call the "grandfather" of unschooling, Susannah Sheffer, unschooling advocate, author and longtime editor of *Growing Without Schooling*, and John Taylor Gatto, who as a critic of compulsory education is a popular author among unschoolers and speaker at unschooling and homeschooling conferences. Other unschooling organic intellectuals, more aptly characterized in a stricter Gramscian sense of the term, include an array of author-advocates whose work, speeches and workshops are well-known among unschoolers. These acolytes tend to both write about their unschooling experiences from a personal perspective that often simultaneously critiques conventional education. They frequently become popular speakers and workshop leaders at unschooling conferences. I had the opportunity to interview a number of such organic intellectuals to get a better sense of the history and a wider perspective on the unschooling movement (see methods section in introduction).

Growing Without Schooling, a magazine that John Holt founded in 1977 to create community among the growing population of unschoolers. Over three hundred unschooling families convened in a hotel in western Massachusetts from around the United States and Canada as well as from England, Australia, Germany and Japan to celebrate Holt's legacy, share ideas, celebrate their successes, meet with like-minded families and develop strategies to maintain their rights as unschoolers.

*Colfax surveyed the crowd as he lowered the microphone, and smiled to the audience. "After 20 years of this, I'm still trying to find a name for what we do. I challenge everyone here to come up with a way to describe what we do in positive terms that don't invoke school." His challenge sparked a lively, and as I would later learn, familiar conversation among this crowd of unschoolers. One mother stood up and said "Well, we're just living. What's wrong with calling it that?" Others chimed in with a variety of terms, ranging from "family learning," to "self-teaching" to "community-based education" to "raising our children."³² Yet, as several parents noted, none of these terms were easily understandable to outsiders. A sandy-haired father who had been rocking a baby in a sling at the back of the room stepped forward, "This is *so* frustrating because we're doing so more than just **not** schooling," He patted the baby through the sling, "But we can't really sidestep schooling for very long—it's just **that** big in our society." Other parents chimed in with agreement. Despite the lively dialogue the attendees did not reach consensus and would have to work out for themselves what to call their distinct form of homeschooling.*

(Field Notes, June 28, 1997)

This episode of existential and discursive malaise illustrates a pervasive problem for unschoolers in the United States.³³ For while on a daily basis unschoolers generally go about

³²Continuations of the topic at other sites indicates that unschoolers often use terms such as "natural learning" to describe their activities.

³³For the purposes of this study, I follow the lead of unschooling families, who generally fall back on "unschooling" as the term of most specificity. Many use the term "homeschooling" (as one word, which de-emphasizes the "schooling" or

living their alternative pedagogies and lifestyles without friction or need to define what they do, they occasionally find themselves either articulating or occluding the distinctive features of their homeschooling to others.³⁴

Colfax's challenge revealed a struggle among unschoolers to name what they do without invoking the institutions they critique. For, even though unschoolers have many ways to articulate and otherwise mark out --through language and, most significantly, lifestyle--the distinction of their educational praxis, they have difficulty divorcing what they do from the mainstream as they construe it. To understand how the unschooling movement, as an alternative lifestyle organized around education, stands in productive relationship with the American system of education, we must understand it as both a distinctive lifestyle and educational praxis. For, at bottom, unschooling (like other countercultural lifestyles) is a route towards distinction. Specifically, it involves families engaged in the production of a distinctly educated, unschooled person. This is a process of embodiment, of lifestyle, of ideology, and of living in social, economic, and cultural space. And, as unschooling is distinctive from other forms of education and lifestyle in America, this process takes work to

home-based aspects of the activity according to several of my informants) more generally and more often. This is particularly the case in contexts where the style of their homeschooling is of little significance to the listener, such as in unschooling-only groups, or in situations in which the unschooling-features of their educational activities might invite unwelcome challenges.

³⁴ As I discuss in chapter eight, unschoolers practice a range of strategies in order to maintain their legal legitimacy as homeschoolers when they must deal with officials from the state's educational apparatus. These may include covering over those aspects of their homeschooling that may appear equivalent to conventional education. More often, however, unschoolers engage in social encounters in which they must calibrate the extent of detail about their practices. As Lila Barksley, a fourteen year-old unschooler explained:

If people ask me where I go to school, I tell them that I'm homeschooled. That's usually enough.

But if they ask me for more details, like 'Who is your teacher?' then I might start to explain about unschooling. And when we hang out with other homeschoolers who don't all unschool, like in my basketball league or my dance troop, which has a lot of Christian kids, then it usually comes up pretty quickly that we don't do school-at-home, because someone will ask me about which curriculum I use or something like that.

She paused and twirled her long braids into a bun, then continued, "Of course, sometimes if they're annoying, I just tell them that I'm in 9th grade..." [Laughs] (Field notes 3/23/00).

develop and legitimate. It requires intellectual labor, several forms of capital and careful processes of legitimation to remain viable.

As one of the frustrated parents above suggested, the distinctive aspects of unschooling make most sense to outsiders in relational terms. Unschoolers at times identify themselves as “homeschoolers” under certain circumstances. They often do so, for example when they speak about their practices to non-homeschoolers whom they perceive as unlikely to appreciate the differences among homeschoolers or in contexts in which they seek to create fellow-feeling with other homeschoolers who might not unschool. To add to this confusion, they sometimes describe themselves as “homeschoolers” in all-unschooling settings (or when talking to the anthropologist) where the fact of their unschooling might be taken for granted among interlocutors. Nevertheless, what distinguishes unschoolers then, is their unique pedagogies and lifestyles. In the following section, I situate the unschooling movement historically and ethnographically in the American educational and cultural landscape.

At the onset of compulsory school laws in the U.S. in 1852, Americans experienced a shift in the principal sites of education. The primary responsibility for educating the nation’s young moved from informal kin and communal networks to formalized, state run (or regulated) institutions of schooling. Americans were initially resistant to compulsory schooling (Tyack 1974). Nevertheless, in recent decades Americans have embraced mass education to the point where schooling has become one of the most pervasive institutions -- virtually synonymous with childhood—in American culture.³⁵

³⁵Conventional and even professional pediatric parlance, for example, describes young children as “pre-schoolers,” or “school-aged” (c.f. www.aap.org).

Recently, however, some Americans have rethought and even reorganized schools and education in the U.S. Contests over the form and content of education have colluded with a general educational conservatism in the United States, manifest most recently in free-market inflected discourses of educational “choice.” As a result, a number of grass-roots initiatives, such as charter schools, vouchers, and the burgeoning homeschooling movement are defining new purposes and practices for education in America. Homeschooling is perhaps most choice-oriented among these alternatives. Today an estimated, 1.2 million³⁶ American children homeschool. Homeschooling is, in fact, the fastest-growing,³⁷ yet perhaps least-studied, phenomenon on the American educational landscape.³⁸

All homeschoolers challenge the common sense of schooling insofar as they disengage from schools, rather than seek to reform them. They thus re-orient the locus of

³⁶The actual number of homeschoolers in the U.S. is difficult to track; homeschoolers are counted on a state-by-state basis, to varying degrees of accuracy (see Stevens 2001 for critique). Several factors influence the reliability of demographic information as well as other statistics on homeschoolers. First, fearing government interference, many homeschoolers avoid surveys or misrepresent their activities in government-sponsored research (Lines, 1999; Ray 1999; Welner and Welner, 2000). Additionally, as Welner (2000) and Lines (1999) suggest, parents who do not need to file paperwork with their states—either because they homeschool under their state’s private school statutes or because their children are not yet of compulsory schooling age—often decline participation in studies. Finally, many families homeschool “underground” that is that they hide their homeschooling activities from the state’s educational and child welfare authorities.

Patricia Lines, formerly at the office of educational research at the department of education, had been attempting to keep track of the size of the homeschooling movement through 1999. She explained that because children go in and out of the school system, “on any given day, there were up to one million homeschoolers in the 1997-1998 academic year” (Lines 1998). Advocacy research puts the numbers slightly higher at 1.23 million children homeschooled in 1996 (c.f. Ray, 1997). On the other hand, Henke, Kaufman, Broughman & Chandler (2000) drew upon government data to claim much smaller figures; they estimated that 287,000 to 757,000 school-aged children homeschooled in 1999.

³⁷ All researchers of homeschooling (even Henke et al, 2000) seem to agree that the number of homeschoolers in the U.S. is increasing rapidly. Lines’ conservative 1998 estimate of 1 million homeschoolers were up from an estimated 300,000 in 1988 and fifteen thousand in the early 1970s. Both Nemer (2004) and Stevens (2001) use the charter school reform movement as a point of comparison to stress the growth and sheer statistical importance of the homeschooling movement. When Stevens published his monograph in 2001, he noted that the “darling reform of many in the education establishment that has received piles of positive press, currently encompasses about 350,000 students—perhaps a third of the number of homeschooled kids. Nemer’s 2004 dissertation cites the charter-school advocacy group Center for Education Reform’s 2002 statistics of about 575,000 children enrolled in 2,700 charter schools for the Fall of 2002 as comparison.

³⁸ For a discussion of the growth of homeschooling as well as the paucity of non-advocate research, see Stevens 2001.

cultural (re)production away from state and private educational institutions and towards intimate familial and communal realms of social life. And while families always fit into the educational package, homeschooling specifically places individual families, with their varied sensibilities about what constitutes a good life, at the center of the educational project. Yet, other than noting that all homeschoolers are subject to the same state laws, regulations, and ordinances in their given states, the only thing that we can safely say about all homeschoolers in the U.S. is that these families challenge the notion that their children's education should take place in school.

The multiplicity of meanings, orientations, and experiences of homeschoolers (well illustrated by the debate renewed by Colfax at the *GWSS* convention) flies in the face of media and sparse scholarly attention's general characterization of homeschooling activity in the United States as a singular movement. Such depictions understate the heterogeneity of homeschooling activity in the U.S. (Welner and Welner, 1999, Stevens 2001).³⁹

For example, sociologist Mitchell Stevens identified two movements in homeschooling, contrasting the social organization of what he termed "believer" homeschoolers (fundamentalist Christian homeschoolers who organized in exclusive believer-only groups) with "inclusive" homeschooling groups, whose associations did not discriminate based on faith.⁴⁰ In Stevens' typology, inclusives served as a cover term for

³⁹Nemer describe homeschooling as "...a broad cultural phenomenon...In fact, families who choose to homeschool represent a surprisingly diverse—along political, religious, and philosophical lines; and increasingly, along racial and economic lines—sampling of American society, and they cite many different reasons for pursuing this option." (Nemer 2004: 6). See also Knowles 1988; Ray 1997; Rudner, 1999; Welner & Welner, 1999).

⁴⁰Interested in how fundamentalist Christians have come to dominate the homeschooling movement politically, Stevens determined that the believers were more effective than the inclusives in their lobbying efforts with local, state and national politicians on account of their generally hierarchical and authoritarian organizational structures. Owing to this influence, Christian homeschooling has come to dominate media and, to some extent, scholarly portrayals of homeschooling (Stevens 2001).

These matters of representation also have implications for educational and regulatory policies

unschoolers as well as all other homeschoolers who were not Christian homeschoolers. Although Stevens distinguishes between the inclusives and the believers, he ultimately describes these homeschoolers as different factions from the same movement, one comprised of “a world of organizations as well as of populations of parents and children” (Stevens 2001: 14). Stevens noted that in general, believers were comfortable talking about “Christian home schooling,” or “the Christian homeschool movement” as an identifiable entity. In contrast, he found that “those on the other side did not enjoy such cognitive luxuries” (Ibid, 19).⁴¹

Christian homeschooling emerged out of the general rise of fundamentalist Christianity that began to sweep the U.S. in the mid-nineteen eighties. It is the largest sector of homeschooling, encompassing upwards of seventy-five percent of homeschooling activity in the U.S. (Livni 2000), which grew exponentially over the past two decades (Ballman, 1995; Rudner, 1999).⁴² Following Reverend James Dobson’s 1982 radio call for Christians to “teach their own,” many Christian parents acted upon what they read as a biblical mandate to homeschool their children (Farriss 1996; Ballman 1996).

Christians generally home school to exercise control over the content of their children’s education and to imbue that content with biblical instruction. These parents see

regarding all homeschoolers. Issues of representation frequently emerge in homeschooling politics. In fact, while unschoolers and other secular homeschoolers have in the past produced short political alliances around their common interests as homeschoolers with fundamentalist Christians these non-Christian homeschoolers find themselves frustrated by the relative dominance of Christian organizations in the politicization of homeschooling. For the rather radical differences between unschooling (for example) and Christian homeschooling are not just philosophical “It’s not just that they’re about original sin and we’re more about original good when it comes to kids,” as one unschooling mother explained, but rather, they are pedagogical. Many unschoolers worry that Christian “leadership” in the homeschooling movement will come to influence the ways that government regulators understand home schooling as school-at-home rather than an open-ended “comparable” (although not necessarily similar) educational experience to conventional education.

⁴¹I found that unschoolers were similar to homeschoolers in this regard; although many unschoolers, like those in the room at the *GW’s* conference, have difficulty describing their activities to outsiders, they have less difficulty distinguishing themselves from other homeschoolers.

⁴²Several researchers cite Muslim Americans as the current fastest-growing segment of the homeschooling population in the U.S. (Biclick et al 2001: 4; Lines 2000; McDowell et al 2000; Welner and Welner 1999).

separation from what they perceive as mainstream culture as crucial to raising godly children. Stevens aptly describes the Christian perspective on conventional schooling in terms of contagions:

For believers home schooling is partly about saving children from multiple contaminants.

These parents concur that that children need individualized instruction, but they add that children need to be kept from various social contagions and educated carefully if they are to become moral adults. (Stevens 2001:53).⁴³

In some respects, Steven's "contagion" theory also applies to unschoolers, who see basic processes of schooling as contagious to their children's development.

Thus drawing from very different cultural roots than Christian homeschooling, unschooling began to cohere in the late 1970s when families who were skeptical of what they perceived as the conformity, surveillance, and age stratification and other objectionable features of formal schooling started to connect. Many of these parents traced their political roots to countercultural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. During this same period, prominent educational reformers such as John Holt, Ivan Illich, and Paul Goodman, who ultimately became disenchanted with some of the unrealized promises of progressive education initiatives such as the free-school movement and open classrooms, began to seek

⁴³See also Maralee Mayberry, "Characteristics and Attitudes of Families Who Home School" *Education and Urban Society* 21 (1988): 32-34; Mayberry and J. Gary Knowles, "Family Unity Objectives of Parents Who Teach Their Children: Ideological and Pedagogical Orientations to Home Schooling," *Urban Review* 21 (1989): 209-225; J. Gary Knowles, "Parents' Rationales for Operating Home Schools," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 20 (1991): 203-30; J. Gary Knowles, Stacey E. Marlow, and James A. Muchmore, "From Pedagogy to Ideology: Origins and Phases of Home Education in the United States, 1970-1990," *American Journal of Education* 100 (1992): 195-235. See also Jane Van Galen and Mary Anne Pitman, eds., *Home Schooling: Political, Historical and Pedagogical Perspectives* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1991).

education reform outside of formal school. Proclaiming that it was wrong to remain in a “broken system,” Holt encouraged parents to “teach their own.”

Holt’s simple message: “trust children” resonated with many parents, particularly those involved in the ‘natural’ parenting and childbirth movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. His several influential books, as well as the forum created through *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS) magazine gave voice, community, and possibility for many of these families. These connections provided sustenance and social (if distant) networks for many unschooling parents who found themselves at the philosophical and educational margins of their local communities. These forums helped attenuate a lack of support and, at times, opposition and helped unschoolers connect beyond their immediate communities. This virtual community would eventually call themselves “unschoolers.” They have since developed a distinctive movement, linked by myriad sources of printed and online media and in myriad face-to-face unschooler-focused gatherings that take place across the United States and elsewhere.⁴⁴ Unschoolers use these connections for moral support and to develop, share, and legitimate unschooling as a pedagogy and lifestyle.

From the legal perspective of educational statutes unschooling is indistinct from conventional homeschooling. The actual number or even percentage of unschoolers among the homeschooling population is as, if not more, difficult to characterize than the number of

⁴⁴Families unschool in Canada, England, Australia, Japan, Germany, Israel, South America and other countries worldwide. Some, like the Australians, describe their activities not as unschooling but “Natural learning.” I limited this ethnographic account to unschooling in the United States for two essential reasons. First, the U.S. has the largest Unschooling population. Additionally, while unschooling may constitute a “worldwide movement that challenges schooling everywhere” (as one father in my study touted), I believe that it must be understood in more local terms; thus each instance of unschooling must be looked at as an educational and lifestyle alternative within the wider cultural and educational context that frames it nationally, by province or even more locally. For example, the “school refusal” phenomenon that gave rise to some of the unschooling practices in Japan, (which a mother from Osaka, sent to the GLWS 25th anniversary conference by her tight-knit homeschooling group detailed through an unexpected translator from among the crowd) has a very different social, political and educational meaning for families there than it would in the U.S, Israel, Germany, or anywhere else.

homeschoolers themselves. A spokesperson at Holt/GWS (publishers of *GWS*) drew upon circulation figures to estimate that approximately one-sixth of homeschoolers unschool.⁴⁵ The demographics of the unschooling movement are somewhat more complicated than sheer numbers suggest, as I consider in the following section.

The Dickey Demographics of Unschooling

Early one morning in August of 2000, I turned off the busy expressway that led out to the third tier suburbs of the metropolitan area in which I conducted my research. I had met the Simpsons, a family of six (musician-turned attorney dad, concert harpist turned- stay-at-home mom and four girls ages 11, 8, 6 and 3) at a book drive organized by a few unschooling families the previous week. I almost missed my turn because a cluster of saplings (planted to replace the forest that builders had razed over the last few decades to accommodate the housing boom) blocked the sign to the entryway of their development. As my car rounded the driveway, I paused to read the sign: “Marble Estates: Deluxe homes starting in the mid-400s.” I let out a low whistle to myself, musing how this neighborhood stood in marked contrast to the one I had visited the day before. There, the Cola-Fitzgerald family unschooled in a cramped and boisterous rowhouse in a working class neighborhood. Lisa Cola endured financial struggle for years in order to continue unschooling with her fourteen year-old daughter and thirteen year-old son. She found several part-time jobs that allowed her to include her children in her work or to swap childcare so she could work without them. Now re-married, she and her husband, Mark alternate shift work that allows the family to continue unschooling while tending full-time to their new baby, Antonia. On

⁴⁵In our 7/20/2001 telephone interview, *GWS* publisher Patrick Farenga explained that in many instances a few families might share copies of *GWS*. He further explained that the estimate that one/sixth of the movement was made up of unschoolers (often circulated within this group’s public sphere) was an educated guess based on twenty years of experience with homeschooling and unschooling.

my drive home from the Marble Estates in the early evening, I reflected on how much more these two families had in common, despite the differences in their economic situations.

As is the case with other Americans in general and with other homeschoolers in particular, unschoolers run the gamut from below the poverty level to extremely affluent.⁴⁶ However, since many unschoolers also identify themselves as engaging in the “voluntarily simplicity” movement -- they scale back their involvements in the market economy-- those who live at or below the poverty level may be there more out of choice than because of limited options (c.f. Grigsby). In my fieldwork, I encountered and heard stories about a very few indigent families with limited educational capital who pooled together to homeschool when faced with situations where homeschooling seemed to be their best options; some chose to unschool. I did not, however, encounter any such families in person.

While there is no demographic literature on unschoolers, discourses about the topic that circulate among unschoolers and those that staffed Holt Associates (publishers of *GWS*) suggest that unschoolers constitute a largely middle-class population with a relatively higher parental educational attainment than that found in the general American population (Sheffer 1997). This raises empirical questions about the type of family economic and child-care arrangements that unschoolers innovate in order to maintain both their unschooling and their desired lifestyles and more generally about the relationship between this type of countercultural movement and class, in a cultural sense.

Although the unschooling movement is difficult to typify demographically, the overall character of their movement nevertheless suggests that unschoolers share some

⁴⁶In a national survey, Bielick et al (2001:8) found the household income of homeschoolers to be the same as that of non-homeschoolers. Specifically, 64 percent of both groups lived in households with annual incomes of \$50,000 or less. Lyman's 1993 survey of Maine homeschoolers found that 70 percent of respondents reported an annual pre-tax household income of less than \$35,000.

outstanding features. Foremost, this is a movement constitutive of people with enough educational and/or social capital to both critique the system of American education and have the sense of power to seek out viable alternatives to it. They also share a faith in children's 'natural' abilities to learn. While unschoolers may be child-directed in their approach to learning, adults must nevertheless be on hand to facilitate, carpool, ensure safety, etc. As a result, many unschooling families, whether headed by one or two parents, get by on less than two full-time incomes. For some families, this means relying on full-time income from one parent. In other families, parents trade shift work. Still other families find ways to earn income from home and as entrepreneurs.⁴⁷

Families unschool throughout the U.S. in many different environments that range from rural to urban areas. According to 1999 subscription data from the now-defunct *GWSS's* publisher, unschoolers can be found throughout the U.S. Still, yet many insiders characterize the movement as a "coastal" and sub-urban phenomenon. Notably, unschoolers tend to cluster in metropolitan regions where fundamentalist Christianity does not often take strong root. One mother from my study, who moved with her family from rural Louisiana to a suburb in the Northeast, described the difficulty of unschooling in the so-called Bible belt of the Southern U.S:

There, everyone expects you to sign a statement of faith just to go on a trip to the museum!...We were more lowly than the 'secular heathens' at schools because they figured that we let our kids do whatever they wanted all day.

This mother reflects that the dearth of unschoolers in areas largely populated by Christian homeschoolers creates limited options for unschoolers who seek group homeschooling

⁴⁷ Consequently, "un-jobbing" or re-configuring work in terms of time, income, and family demands, has recently taken a prominent role in the unschooling public sphere.

opportunities. Moreover, she indicates major differences in perspectives between unschoolers and other homeschoolers, particularly evangelical Christian homeschoolers.

Research suggests that homeschoolers are evolving into more ethnically and economically diverse movements.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, many insiders and outsiders alike characterize homeschooling in general and unschooling particularly as primarily white, middle-class phenomena. African-American homeschoolers in particular often have different experiences and critiques of the conventional educational system than homeschoolers of European descent. Like many African-American homeschoolers, Donna Nichols-White and her husband (who unschooled with their children), were critical of what schools could do for their families. In an essay entitled “Dina sour Homeschooling” Nichols-White explains:

During slavery, the white folks got the ham, while we had to live off the chitlins.

The same conditions exist today. The best in education goes to rich children and we are receiving the scraps (regardless of how great our school district is). Well, scraps will not make our children independent. (Nichols-White in Hern et al 1996:74).

She and her husband decided to unschool so that their sons “were not going to become stereotypical ‘endangered black males,’” as she put it (ibid). They instead “planned for them to become intelligent, independent, and productive men.” (Ibid: 73) and saw homeschooling (in their case unschooling) as a conduit for these goals.

⁴⁸Drawing from government household survey data, Bauman (2002) estimated that whites constitute 75.8 percent of the homeschooling population. Nevertheless, all data indicate that the homeschooling demographics are rapidly changing to include an expansion of people from all ethnic and class groups in the U.S. (Knowled 1988; McDowell et al 200; Ray 1999; Rudner 199; Samuels 2002; Wahisi 1995; Welner & Welner 1999). Conservative figures estimate that African Americans make up 5% of the general homeschooling population but also comprise the fastest-growing segment of homeschoolers (<http://www.afamunschool.com/>). However, these data fail to indicate the percentage of these homeschoolers who also unschool.

Nichols-White met and encouraged other African Americans in their homeschooling and/or unschooling. She often argued against the notion that Black parents cannot afford to homeschool:

I have met single parents, adoptive parents, welfare parents, and families who lived well below the poverty level...I know teenagers who homeschooled themselves responsibly while their parents worked (Ibid: 74).

Instead, she felt that African-Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities could not afford to not homeschool. Nichols-White identified some distinctive cultural and pedagogical needs of these homeschoolers. For several years in the 1990s, she edited and published *The Drinking Gourd* a magazine, website, and book company that provided resources for multi-cultural homeschooling and unschooling families.

S. Courtney Waldron, editor of *FUNgasa:Free Oneself*⁴⁹, an online publication for African-American Unschoolers also identified and worked to address specific needs and wants of minority homeschoolers. She worked in particular, to introduce African American homeschoolers to unschooling. She explained on her webpage that:

One of the most challenging aspects of homeschooling in these United States is finding a network of support from others who share your vision of raising spiritually whole and healthy African-American children. While the number of Black homeschooling is increasing, families still often find themselves a minority within a minority and face many difficulties in networking with other African-American Homeschoolers and locating learning materials which positively reflect African and African-American culture.

⁴⁹ <http://www.afamunschool.com/fungasaarchives04.html>

To remedy this perceived void in the unschooling community, FUNGaSSA! provides several resources for African-American unschooling parents, including separate list-serves for parents and teens. Waldron explained to me that she believes that the African American unschooling movement continues to grow as a consequence of the explicit racism of some parts of the Christian homeschooling movement and some of what she described as “the more alienating” “culturally-white” dimensions of the movement come to the fore. To illustrate what she meant by these culturally-white aspects of unschooling, Waldron explained:

[The white unschoolers] were nice enough, but I just got tired of reading about Monty Python references on all the unschooling chat pages... African Americans just have a slightly different common culture... So African American unschoolers are finding each other here and elsewhere. (Phone interview, July 17, 2004).

Waldron also indicated that many of the African Americans in her network arrived at unschooling as a set of practices and pedagogies of “innovating on the fly” that they identified as part of a distinct African and African-American oriented way of learning. Moreover, many African American unschoolers identify themselves as Christians and as devout Muslims, whereas the main of unschooling is multi-religious but with a strong secular humanist presence. Consequently, African American unschoolers do not necessarily identify themselves culturally with what Waldron described as the mainstream of the unschooling movement.

Thus, African Americans who unschool have found and created social networks to fill in the racial, cultural and pedagogical voids that they found in the homeschooling movement and within the unschooling movement. This innovation of social networks also

reflects how the unschooling movement evolves over time, with different players coming to the fore. In my own research, I encountered mostly white, middle class unschoolers who were themselves often aware of African Americans unschooling, but did not necessarily have much personal contact with such families. I thus raise the issue of the growing movement of African American unschoolers to indicate that African Americans are a growing but still minority presence in the unschooling movement, which I did not necessarily encounter in the main of my ethnographic research.

Thus, like other movements, unschooling is a “moving” target; its demographics and forms of communication have shifted somewhat over the last three decades and they appear to continue to do so in response to other social and educational developments in the United States. For example, during this writing the foundational unschooling magazine *Growing Without Schooling* ceased publication and a journal called *Life Learning*, with a slightly different focus (on “Self-Directed Learning”, “Homeschooling” and “Distance Education”) and editorial format (it is less reader-shaped than *GWS*) has taken its place. Additionally, the online unschooling public sphere has grown exponentially. Furthermore, homeschooling and unschooling continue to gain media (and at times legislative) attention and seem to have become somewhat more accepted (if not well understood) as alternatives to conventional education. Finally, new educational funding structures have made online homeschooling an easier endeavor for many families (although these schools still hold less appeal for unschoolers than for other homeschoolers, as they are generally incompatible with unschooling praxis). However, having recently checked back with several of my informant families, it appears that although the era of instant messaging and online educational opportunities may have sped up and widened some of their activities, the basic life ways of

unschoolers have remained essentially the same as when I conducted my research from 1997-2001.

Now that I have located unschooling on the American educational landscape and detailed how the unschooling countercultural movement evolved as a distinctive movement with respect to the wider homeschooling movements in the United States, we can take a closer ethnographic look at unschoolers principles and practices. In the following chapters, I approach unschooler's lifestyles from a topical and developmental perspective.

Unschooler's countercultural identities and practices evolve over time. Before considering unschoolers lifestyles, it behooves us to understand some of the routes that unschoolers take into their practices and to get to know some of my informants. I introduce these in the following chapter.

Ch. 3. Routes In: How Key Informants Came to Unschooling

We came to home schooling viscerally, with our understanding incomplete, pondering no more than a year's trial run. I wish I could write that my wife and I had excellent reasons for deciding to home school. We didn't however. It was in the gut....My wife attempted to visit the local kindergarten, to no avail. It's principal's policy forbade such visits. Meanwhile I sought to convince myself that my own experience of student life, [which] was nightmarishly dreary and an incomparable waste of time was my own experience, nothing more....In May (before the first year), we contemplated books on education; in June we talked, July we wrung hands, August felt deep and hot and still, September came, and then one morning the big yellow school bus arrived, waited for a moment with its door swung open, and our child did not get on it. (Guterson: CITE)

I. Routes In and Reasons that Build

I begin this chapter on how people “get in” to unschooling with a passage from a polemical, refined and edited text because David Guterson’s book circulates widely among unschoolers; many of my informants read it and described the passage as an accurate depiction if not of their experiences, then of how they felt moving through their own paths into unschooling. Also, Guterson’s story reveals parents’ activities and emotional investment in the route towards homeschooling. Moreover, it tracks a common teleology of parent’s experiences as they arrived at unschooling. The sequence often goes something like this: First, we had an inkling; then we tried to make the system accommodate us; then we read some; then we fretted; then we were fine.

Guterson’s account, like those of many unschoolers, invokes a sense of “gut,” a viscosity that seems to arise inexplicably, sometimes without “excellent reasons.” Other unschoolers used their “guts” to pull children abruptly out of school or to support their

teenagers in their decision to “rise out” (a term in opposition to the perceived mainstream’s use of the disparaging term “drop out”) of school. Still others contend that they came to unschooling as their conventional homeschooling practices of schooling at home devolved in structure as parents saw the “wisdom” of their children’s “autonomous” educational endeavors. Finally, most of the unschoolers I encountered identified unschooling as an outgrowth of what many described as “trust-based” or “attached” parenting practices (which I consider in greater detail in the following chapter).

While these tropes dominate the stories, I contend, however, that a confluence of parents’ educational biographies, their parenting experiences and their social situatedness (the types of resources, social, economic and educational) shape not only these stories, but the type of “viscerality” that Guterson described. Furthermore, when unschoolers draw upon those resources, they develop an identity *as* unschoolers, which shapes their subjectivities.

In this chapter, I introduce some of my informants and provide background on their development as unschoolers. In so doing, I call attention to the shaping influences of educational and social capital (including the ability to ‘activate’ and cultivate these), which, as we will see, come through in the educational and vocational biographies and the stories that parents tell to explain why and how they became unschoolers. These stories also reveal some of the personal and social complexities involved in developing a countercultural identity over time.

It’s Kind Of Like Vegetarianism: Some Assumptions About The Dialectics Of “Becoming” And “Being” An Unschooler.

After a while, [unschooling] becomes this, hmm, entire way of seeing, you know? It started out as something small...we thought twice about pre-school because we liked to stay up late and didn't like the morning rush. Then one of my clients told me about an unschooling playgroup. I'd heard of homeschooling, but not unschooling and I started to read up on it and it sounded a lot like what we were doing anyway. Then the playgroup was like this final nudge 'cause it made things easy, you know, support and just seeing how other families do it—you know how groups are.... So, after a while, you start to get new eyes. ...you notice little things like how people don't trust kids to handle themselves, and you notice how much control there is, you know, with unschooling, everything looks different... And then you find all these other reasons why homeschooling makes sense. And the reasons [to homeschool] just build and build ...I guess its like being a vegetarian, you know, where you start out for one reason, like an empathy for animals and then as you get into it, you learn more about, say, the health benefits and the environmental things like all the water wasted in meat production...stuff like that. So the reasons build and you wouldn't go back to a carnivorous way of life no matter what.

-MaryBeth Sbrolla, who runs a part-time book-keeping business from her home office and unschools with her husband Jeremy and their sons Justin and Scott (ages 7 and 4).

Mary Beth's vegetarianism analogy cautions against attempts to understand the routes "in" to a particular alternative practice, in this case unschooling, as a linear process. It suggests that instead, that one's unschooling identity develops over time, as many of my informants indicated. Thus at the outset of this chapter, I offer a few essential observations about the "routes in" to becoming and being an unschooler, which we can take for granted in each of the stories that I detail below as I introduce my informants as character types. First,

although people get into unschooling for a characteristic variety of reasons, their reasons to unschool grow over time so that if the initial motivating factor dissipates, the practice persists. For example, a family that began to unschool because they felt that the local public and private schools didn't suit their needs might continue to unschool after moving to an area with better school choices.

Second, people experience their identities as unschoolers in an ongoing developmental process. Third, and in a related vein, the practice and social experiences of being an unschooler, including occasions to legitimate unschooling, often produce a shifting, unschooling subjectivity --what Mary Beth described as "new eyes."⁵⁰ These new unschooling eyes produce an altered perspective on a range of social phenomena, not necessarily directly related to unschooling. In other words, the practice of unschooling alters unschoolers' identities and perspectives over time.

I also noticed that for many unschoolers, this developmental process of changing subjectivity also entails a shifting relationship with the "schooled," or "mainstream" world. Thus neophyte unschoolers, who often encounter intense challenges at the outset, sometimes have a more intensely antagonistic relationship to schooling than more experienced unschoolers. As Seth Novak, unschooling father of four and one of the public intellectuals local to many of my informant families once joked, "There's no bigger zealot than a recent convert." Over time, it seems, many seasoned unschoolers develop a more comfortable relationship with their countercultural identities vis-à-vis the mainstream as they construe it. Thus, I found that most seasoned unschoolers adopted a more characteristically "live and let live," attitude, as Nancy Plent, founder of the New Jersey Unschoolers' network

⁵⁰This is something of a teleological narrative of sorts, just as Alcoholics come to narrate their lives from the perspective of their relationship to alcohol. (c.f. Cain 1991; Wortham 2001).

described it.⁵¹ Bearing in mind these observations and baseline assumptions about the routes in to unschooling, we can attend to the stories unschoolers tell about how they came to unschool.

Shorthand for Insiders: Telling the Unschooling Story

The stories that unschoolers tell each other and told me about how they “got in,” shared a characteristic typology that other unschoolers seem to find sensible. While I only examined a few of these for their narrative structure, someone familiar with these stories can identify within them the type of teleological narrative that alcoholics (c.f. Cain 1991) or converts (c.f. Harding 1992) often tell. On the other hand, I noticed that such teleologies are often presupposed, and therefore often abbreviated, among unschoolers as a shorthand version of an unschooling self-narrative (c.f. Wortham 2001). Thus, when asked how they “got in” to unschooling, short responses, such as “We were just too busy to get to the bus stop,” or “We just couldn’t pack lunches anymore,” or “My son sings when he works,” or “One day we just threw out the curriculum,” or “When they suggested a Ritalin holiday over the summer and we got our son back we decided to keep him,” or “I don’t want her to be an employee,” etc., presuppose an understanding among insiders of the implications of such statements for why someone would choose to unschool in a schooled world. These explanations also provide occasion for interlocutors to perform and often enhance their social connections when they gather as unschoolers.

⁵¹However, under prompting (by others or when I asked particular types of questions that seemed to scratch a little deeper at the surface of these stated attitudes) many would still express deeply-felt ambivalence towards schooling. For example, Evelyn Richards, Seth Novak’s wife, offered conflicting positions: “We could probably sit here and brainstorm a dozen great alternatives to compulsory schools that would address the needs of kids and their families, but the fact is that schools still exist,” and (when discussing alternative schools or programs, “[Those arrangements] sound great but the best school is still a school.”

Yet, although parents and citizens have a whole raft of concerns with conventional schooling, relatively few pull their children out of the (public and private) system altogether, fewer still would consider child-directed learning such as unschooling, which prioritizes children pursuing their own interests. What's different about unschooling parents? The answer may have something to do with unschoolers commonalities as much as it relates to their distinctiveness from other Americans.

Unschoolers articulate a faith-like commitment to learning as “natural” so much so that efforts that interfere with the “natural” process of learning are met with great disdain. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that many (seemingly most) unschooling parents have experiences with “natural” parenting—a construct that has emerged in response to the technocratic maternity care and parenting practices that have arisen over the last several generations.⁵² Among unschoolers, the “natural” is almost always valorized over the “human-made.” Still, unschoolers are not unique in this regard; many people who practice ‘natural’ parenting (c.f. Bobel 2004) or who engage in consumer practices that emphasize nature (organic foods, voluntary simplicity, etc), may be sympathetic to ideals of natural learning, but, nevertheless do not see unschooling as a logical or viable choice.⁵³ However, for most of my informants and the unschoolers that I read about, these choices seemed a logical route to unschooling.

II. Meet Some of My Informants

⁵² I consider these practices in greater detail in the chapter that follows.

⁵³ See Stevens (2001) for a discussion of other child-focused educational practices such as Montessori and Waldorf education. Parents arrive at these types of educational choices for a whole range of reasons that I cannot explore in this study. My basic contention here is that not every parent who takes a “natural parenting” route finds the logic of unschooling practices compelling or viable.

In what follows, I select a sample of my informants to bring into relief distinctive paths along which families arrive at unschooling as a viable educational choice for their families. This sampling reflects an array of the motivations to unschool that I encountered throughout my research. It also introduces a number of my key informants, whom, as I stated in the methods section of the introduction, seem representative of the wider unschooling population.

While unschoolers engage in their unschooling practices as families, in many instances, certainly in most of the instances that I encountered, mothers often take the lead in initiating unschooling and in directing much of the unschooling practices in their homes and communities. I spent much of my time with these women and consequently, I learned much of what I know about unschooling from their perspectives. Thus, with few exceptions, I below introduce families from the perspective of unschooling mothers. I also introduce them according to the types of familial resources that they enjoy such as whether or not they enjoy ample educational, social and/or economic capital as these aspects of identity influence their experiences in unschooling.

Maternalist-activist Entrepreneurs: Rachel Berger, Jill Peters and Eve Small

Right now, Mike makes good money, but he's an em-ploy-ee, who needs to ask permission to take a day off. In my book, that's not okay. It's my goal in the next five years to make enough money so that he can be a full-time unschooling parent and free agent, like me.

-Unschooling mother, La Leche League leader, and entrepreneur, Eve Small

Both Rachel Berger and Jill Peters have been involved in birth activism at some point in their lives. Jill still teaches the childbirth method that I currently teach. Rachel, who

introduced me to the method when I was pregnant, used to teach it when she lived in Brooklyn. Like many unschoolers, both women have been involved in La Leche League, an international breastfeeding support organization and mothered their children in the “attachment” style (co-sleeping, baby-wearing, child-led weaning) that I consider in the following chapter.⁵⁴ Both women have developed small, flexible, home-based businesses that grew out of their experiences as mothers.

After ten years of carrying children, Rachel developed a business through which she sells baby and child carriers with the added specialty of personalized fitting with the baby/child in arms. Along with this service, Rachel provides an education (supplemented with handouts, citations from primary and secondary resources) on the benefits of baby-wearing and informally reinforces breastfeeding and the ideals of attachment parenting, explaining, for example, that “With a front carrier, it’s so easy to nurse on the go,” or, “When you have your hands are free like that, your baby can just fall asleep wherever she happens to be and you can get on with whatever you’re doing,” etc. At the same time, since Rachel’s children are often around when clients visit their home (she sometimes brings them along for house calls), she feels that she is simultaneously accustoming them to the mores of conducting a home-based business while modeling for others the unschooling ethos of having one’s children nearby as one works.

Jill Peters runs her business as a childbirth teacher, which requires preparatory, computer and phone time to arrange and instructional time in the evenings, from home. Like many unschooling mothers, she also has a small, flexible, home-based sales business, which she can “scale up or down,” depending on her family’s needs. Jill is a local distributor

⁵⁴ Not surprisingly, the birth activist movement, La Leche League and attachment parenting organizations (c.f. www.api.org), which all, in different ways focus on trusting ‘nature’ as a benevolent, wise force of self-actualization, have many unschoolers among their membership.

for a specialty cloth diaper company. Like many other married unschooling mothers who have businesses, both Rachel and Jill view their sales businesses as “extraordinarily helpful in getting by,” in Jill’s words, but also not the type of income upon which their families rely for basic living expenses.

Both Rachel and Jill advocate on behalf of birth choices in Pennsylvania and provide support to breastfeeding and home birthing mothers. Rachel does so on a voluntary basis and has become a node in her local geographic and Jewish community⁵⁵ as the “maven” or expert on such topics, while Jill, who describes herself as a “birth junkie,” views birth work as her primary calling --an identity that she places, in most contexts, before unschooling. In her work as a childbirth teacher, doula (labor support person), and in her training as a midwife, Jill counts on her husband’s flexibility and her social networking with other unschooling mothers for childcare.

While Rachel draws upon Jewish conceptions of mothering as the source of her unschooling praxis and birth activism, Jill strongly identifies her birth activism and her unschooling praxis from a feminist perspective that focuses on “choice.” Like many unschooling and natural parenting mothers, these women situate their feminism, what I describe as a “maternalist” framework, or an approach that treats the female body, particularly its reproductive/nurturant capacities, as the site of female power (c.f. Tong 1998; Bobel 2002; Blum 1993, 1999).

⁵⁵ I should note here that my own identity as an occasionally-practicing Jewish woman of Israeli-American heritage likely shaped my relationship with my Jewish informants; it provided a layer of co-identity in some respects with my two Jewish informants. Because I speak fluent Hebrew, I easily connected with an Israeli woman at an unschooling conference. With Rachel, for whom Judaism is deeply implicated in her identity and daily practices, my Jewish heritage enabled me to understand the practices within her household and accorded us some early connections.

Both Jill and Rachel graduated from college and worked for many years before mothering brought them a hiatus from institutional work. Perhaps owing to their vocations, through which they share sometimes controversial practices with others, both Jill and Rachel often draw upon their educational capital to comfortably navigate primary sources at the library and online. These they distribute to friends and colleagues when a situation arises where research may help to legitimate a position. They do this more often than some of the other parents in my study, who often cite secondary sources or hearsay when they describe the efficacy or legitimacy of practices.⁵⁶

Each woman makes her life with husbands who work in relative autonomy, as private contractors. Jill's husband, Brian, works as an independent building contractor who remodels homes and small businesses, while Rachel's husband, Irving Tobin, runs a financial planning business from a home office. Although Brian was never home during my visits, Jill describes him as "incredibly available," in unschooling; for the most part, they rarely rely on babysitters while Jill teaches, attends births and trains as a midwife⁵⁷. Like a few of the unschooling fathers that I encountered, Irving enjoys a great deal of flexibility in his work life. With the exception of client appointments, he spends his work time at home, where he emerges frequently from his home office throughout the day and participates in many of the family's out-of-home activities. Finally, Jill and Rachel describe their initial motivations to unschool as having to do with the cost of private schools, yet after several years of unschooling, neither mother would "ever consider" school, "even if the best school in the world was free."

⁵⁶ I consider unschoolers habits of research and marshaling of educational and social capital in their evolving relationship as countercultural practitioners in the chapter that follows.

⁵⁷ Like many unschooling mothers, Jill does, however, participate in co-operative childcare. Twice weekly, she exchanges childcare with an unschooling friend so that she can study and prepare for her own childbirth classes and have "some self time."

Jill, and Brian, both college graduates, unschool with their two children Owen and Nicollette (ages 8 and 3) in an urban, primarily working-class neighborhood. When Owen was born, they moved for a time to the suburbs, "...because that's what we thought we were supposed to do." They were "less than impressed" with the quality of the local suburban schools and, as avowed urbanites, found themselves stymied by life in the suburbs. In addition, they felt that the generally racially segregated suburb and school would not be a "great environment to raise our bi-racial children," as Jill put. Jill, who is Caucasian, found herself more irritated by the subtle suburban racism than Brian, who having grown in an all-black family in a mostly-white community, had grown up with it.

When they returned to the city, Jill and Brian saw homeschooling as the most viable option for their family. Jill explains that like most families who homeschool in the city, they were "blown away" by the cost of private schools and "homeschooling became this no-brainer." Like many unschoolers that I encountered, Jill and Brian both come from "teacher families"; while this sometimes meant headaches for those whose teacher-family members objected to homeschooling, in the Peters's case, this trait meant an outpouring of support for homeschooling, as their relatives teach in troubled urban school districts. Jill explains that they have all "weighed in with their support because they feel that unschooling holds out greater opportunities for a good education than the public schools."

Like other unschoolers in my study, Jill and Brian had a nominal, as opposed to experiential, transition from "homeschooling" to unschooling. In other words, they came to the name "unschooling" to describe their homeschooling practices after they encountered the term. This was a common path for many of the unschoolers in my study, which worked seamlessly and primarily through reading about unschooling and through exposure to other

unschoolers. “It was a continuation of what we were doing already, but it was nice to see that other people were doing the same things with their kids,” Jill explained. They belong to an unschooling group that meets once weekly at a city playground. Jill also subscribes to a “post events only” list-serve for local homeschoolers. Jill is not particularly concerned that few families on this list unschool, yet she also articulates the boundaries that she sets up around her family’s close homeschooling communities:

I’m fine with going to the museum or a crayon factory with people who homeschool differently from how we do but things get dicey with play dates because we’re not interested in doing things that are too schoolish or too Jesusy.

Thus, when Jill cultivates her homeschooling networks, she puts boundaries around the types of pedagogies and people involved in her children’s experiences. In addition to cultivating social networks, Jill’s mainstay of support comes in the form of a dear friend who unschools, a “sister in this,” with whom she talks almost daily.

Rachel, who describes herself and her financial advisor husband, Irving Tobin as “Crunchy Orthodox” Jews, had always imagined that she would send her children to Solomon Schechter, the local (mostly conservative⁵⁸) Jewish Day school in the community where she grew up. Yet, after marrying Irving and living with him in “schtetl-like” and for Rachel, utopian, community in Brooklyn for a time, Rachel found Schechter to be somewhat lacking in “yiddishkeit” and “mentschkeit” (“knowledgeable” and “kindly”) Jewish values. As well, they found the tuition to both Schechter and the area’s Waldorf school, “astronomical for what you get.” Like many unschoolers that I encountered, Rachel found appeal in Rudolph Steiner’s Waldorf education, particularly for its humanistic and holistic approach to education but found it either too expensive, the school too far away? or the

⁵⁸ “Conservative” here refers to a sect within Judaism rather than a set of political positions.

instruction too structured. Not surprisingly, the internet is home to a number of Waldorf-based unschooling and homeschooling groups.⁵⁹ Like Jill, Rachel decided to try unschooling from the outset and “hasn’t looked back.”

Having lived under more idyllic circumstances in Brooklyn, where “everyone took care of each other and looked out for each other’s kids,” Rachel, like many communitarian-minded unschoolers, dedicates herself replicating that type of environment for her children in a suburban setting. This in part, provides added meaning for her volunteer endeavors, in her community, which take up much time in her weekly and monthly calendars. These include a weekly food co-op, organizational and “face time” in a food pantry program, a childrens’ clothing exchange and volunteer work at a women’s shelter. To further produce a sense of community in her family, she and Irving have opened their home, where I spent more hours than any other unschooling home, to other children and families. The only time that I ever recall finding their home without non-family children was when I visited shortly after the (home) birth of their third child, Tzvi. As I sat on the bed with Rachel and the new baby, I suddenly realized how eerily quiet the three-bedroom house seemed. Rachel’s parents had taken the other children, Uri, then eight and Amir, then four, to the zoo, leaving the house devoid of its usual bustle.

One of my other key unschooling informants, Eve Small, whose husband, Mike works out of the house as an attorney, is also a maternalist activist and entrepreneur. While less of an activist than Rachel, Eve nevertheless serves as a La Leche League leader and participates in a number of community-service activities, to which she brings her children. A

⁵⁹ C.f. <http://www.waldorfhomeschoolers.com/>, <http://www.christopherushomeschool.org/>, <http://www.waldorfwithoutwalls.com/>

former aerospace engineer, Eve now restores and “flips” houses in partnership with her real-estate agent sister.

Although I had met her at other community activities (La Leche League, story hour and clothing exchanges), I got to know Eve particularly well at Rachel’s house, where we both became “Friday regulars” –I because Fridays were my day off from teaching and my daughter, Ella’s day off from school and Eve because she helped Rachel sort through the co-op orders before the sundown onset of the Jewish Sabbath. Although she is not herself Jewish, Eve has studied up on Jewish dietary laws so that Rachel’s children can and some of their friends can play in her home. Eve’s daughter Madeline is close in age to my own daughter, Ella and Eve took my childbirth class prior to the birth of Connor when Madeline was four, so we spent considerable time together since the official “close” of my fieldwork. Our relationship, which developed as I moved into the analytic phase of research, has yielded some of my most essential insights about unschooling and some of the most intersubjective production of knowledge experiences between me and my informants.⁶⁰

After a few years of “hanging out,” I finally asked Eve about their initial impetus to unschool. Although I had assumed that her close relationship with Rachel and her contacts with other unschoolers had precipitated the idea, she explained that instead, Mike initiated their unschooling:

He saw that Madeline was climbing and running and jumping and doing her thing and she was always having these amazing moments of knowledge. He said, ‘Gee, she’s just so happy. And she’s doing so well. Why change anything?’ And I thought, well, yeah, we could do this some more. Homeschooling wasn’t on the radar at the time, but then he brought it up and we started to talk about it seriously and began

⁶⁰ And was thus the impetus to my meditation on the temporal and spatial permeability of my field work.

asking around, and talked to people like Rachel. Then I read John Taylor Gatto's book *Dumbing Us Down*, which pretty much cinched it for unschooling. For me, it's the passion of freedom and the whole not raising or being employees.

Eve's and Mike's unschooling story reflects a common theme among unschoolers, a gradual sense (shaped, as I contend and explore in the next chapter, by their parenting practices) that things were fine without school.

Although most unschoolers cite John Holt's work as pivotal to their thinking about unschooling, I was not surprised to learn that Gatto's collection of essays on the "Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Education," resonated so deeply for Eve and Mike. Gatto's argues passionately, from the perspective of a seasoned teacher, that schooling roots out independent thought and action. Eve laughed when I mentioned that he was head of the New York libertarian party, and said, "Well, there you go," and elaborated further:

Schools create employees and that is the last thing I want for my child. You know, "Study what you're told and eat lunch when you're told to be hungry and pee when the bell rings. It's the opposite of compassion or of having a free mind that can solve problems.

As Eve was one of the few unschoolers I encountered who so deliberately linked unschooling to vocation, and perhaps because I knew that she and her husband both had advanced degrees, I asked her more about her experiences as an employee than her educational experiences. She explained:

I wasn't totally unhappy as an employee because I liked my work, but it's just your life not being your own. More so for the big companies that I worked for than the small ones, but you still don't own your own time. And Mike and I talked about that

from the time we were first married. We talked about how, unless you have the kind of business where your time isn't linked to your money, then you'll never have freedom. And time is so precious, you know? And if your life, blood and food [are] directly connected to how much time you put in, that's not good. You know, you have to spend three hours away from your kid to make your car payment and then another ten hours to make the insurance and so on. We talked about it before having kids. But it became more pressing once we became parents.

In this sense, Eve and Mike, like many other unschoolers, connect school life with life in the workplace and seek for their children and themselves as much agency and freedom in their "work" as possible. Moreover, like many other unschoolers, they claim to value what they see as quality time with family over material goods and comfort.

Moreover, like many unschooling mothers I encountered, Eve had a strong maternalist streak. Eve's maternalism manifests itself in a constant theme of what I characterize as a belief and effort to cultivate in her children a strong sense of self: an awareness of their bodies, their emotions and their needs. Through idioms of mothering, Eve often talks about and focuses her efforts at finding ways for "everyone to meet their needs." This talk about needs, however also has a bit of a bite, best characterized by what I have come to see as Eve's mantra about being a mother: "It's all about me!"

Eve elaborates this point about self-care in many ways. When once recounting a conversation that she had with Mike about why he needed to protect her early morning walks, she explained:

I told him, 'I am the heart of this family,' (paused and laughed), that doesn't mean, of course,

that he's the head, I guess that we're both the head, which is why I switched metaphors,

come to think of it, so I said, "I'm the heart of this family, but if my well gets empty, then I

won't be able to give and give and give anymore.

Thus, Eve consciously weighs the impact of circumstances or choices against her own needs. In unschooling fashion, she recounted this story as a subtle way to "teach" a perspective on unschooling gender relations and parenting. She offered this the above anecdote in response to another unschooling mothers' complaint about not managing to find time to herself.⁶¹

Eve contends that the approach of considering one's needs first, helps her entire family:

There's this refrigerator magnet that says, "If Mama Ain't Happy, Ain't nobody Happy," and

that's where my thinking goes. If the mother is a wreck, you know, cranky or angry or

underfed or tired or overwhelmed or resentful, then that's no good for everyone. So

I make

⁶¹ I did not systematically raise the topic of "self time" among the unschooling mothers that I encountered. Given the integrative ethos that pervades unschooling families as well as the importance that the wider American culture places on the value of time by/for one's self, this would have been an interesting issue to explore. What I did find, anecdotally, was that some mothers, like Jill, Eve and all of the stay-at-home mothers who did not work outside of their homes, put a premium on time away from their family. Many of them participated in weekly or bi-weekly activities with other female friends and some mothers, like Eve, made it a point to take daily walks without their children (Eve often wore Connor in a sling during these walks but she didn't consider a nursing to be an impediment to her ability to "have some time and space alone."). Vanessa Fields related her dismay at the number of company functions associated with Mitchell's work that were "children unfriendly." While she had little objection to parent's only events (we once bumped into her and her husband at a downtown restaurant, celebrating their anniversary without their children), she explained that she was "Appalled with how much time [the people at the company events] they spent disparaging their children and focusing on how glad they were to be away from them."

On the other hand, several unschooling parents made it a point to mention that, in the words of Wendi Brice, who we will meet below, they unschooled "because we like our children's company." Mothers offering this perspective disparaged what they perceived to be mainstream society's emphasis on "me-time." Several frequent mention of how they consider time with their children to be inseparable from "my time."

it a point to try to take everyone's needs into consideration, I have to start with myself first.

Sometimes I meet these women who turn motherhood into an entire martyr thing. Maybe

they're thinking that by putting their kids foremost, they're doing them a favor.

When I see

that, I think 'What kind of role modeling is that?' and besides, it's really hard sustain a giver

role, if you don't feel like you have much to give.

Yet, to ensure that her "well" stays full, Eve often draws upon her strong sensibilities about "nature," and her trust in what she calls "the wisdom of the body." For example, she once talked about writing a book for new parents called *Make it Easy on Yourself!* -Eve's central premise for the book, in many senses, echoes attachment parenting philosophy. In Eve's words, "It's much easier on a parent to just meet your kids real needs as they come up than to push them off. Then there should be no struggle over wants, which often come from unmet needs.⁶² She assumes here, as many natural parenting advocates do, that mothers have a strong need to have their babies nearby. Thus, in Eve's model the types of "self-care" commodities put forth to new mothers, which range from infant care centers in gyms to "Yoga while she naps" videos miss the [attachment] point that these activities should

⁶² Eve went on to elaborate some of the details of the book, many of which bring further nuance to her principles of the wise body coupled with focusing on a parents' needs. These include: Instead of struggling to get them down for a nap, just let them sleep on you and do your own thing. Pay now or pay later. It's a lot easier to deal with a temper tantrum over a cookie than to deal with the sugar high that's going to come afterwards. Try cutting an apple. If that's too much, then just give your kid an apple and don't bring that stuff into your house to begin with. Too much arguing. Don't argue. If you've given your kids what they *need* then you have nothing to explain and no reason to apologize."

incorporate babies. This premise, I suspect, is predicated on an individualistic model of care presupposes that babies need their mothers exclusively.

Despite these maternalist assumptions, all of the mothers in my study actually parented with an emphasis on paternal competence. While these mothers engage in a relatively high degree of attachment behaviors, their babies, for example never or rarely received bottles of pumped breast milk, which limited the number of hours that they could separate, they all insisted that their husbands figured centrally into the care package from the time that their children were infants. For example, to ensure that their children would have sleep cues other than breastfeeding, Jill's husband, Brian, always incorporated "rubbies," (massage techniques) into their children's night time sleep rituals so that Jill could teach or attend births at night. Rachel just "assumed that Irving was competent"; and would leave all of the boys in his care once Tzvi was too big to stay in the sling during her Sunday afternoon shift at the library. Mike Small developed his own habits and sense of confidence in caring for Madeline before Eve could, as she spent the first postpartum weeks recovering from difficult cesarean births. "All I did was breastfeed," she explained, "so there was never an issue of the burden of care being all on me. That [sensitivity] has stayed with us."

Finally, Eve's approach to mothering, focusing on the self first, with a belief that social good, whether at the level of the family or wider social units, emerges from the well-tended individual, coheres with Eve's political leanings and with those of some other unschoolers. Although unschoolers span across the political spectrum, they often emphasize individual autonomy and freedoms. Consequently, I encountered a number of unschoolers who identify as Libertarians politically. In addition, a disproportionate number of unschoolers in my study identified as Unitarian Universalists.

Like many unschoolers, Eve combines, at times, a classically liberal to libertarian perspectives with an intense concern over issues of social justice. In a quick conversation prior to the 2004 presidential election, she explained that she and Mike, like many former Republicans, felt unwelcome in the current Republican party, with its “expanded, intrusive government that’s growing in the exact opposite direction of where we think it should go.” Although Eve has been the most expressive of my informants in terms of linking unschooling and issues of vocation and economy, “The point is,” she once explained, “to grow good entrepreneurs who can do good things instead of having all these bad people getting rich,” she is not alone among unschoolers in her sentiments that unschooling produces competent and compassionate adults. In addition, Eve incorporates these ideals into her mothering practices.

Often preoccupied with mental health and “everyone’s needs,” Eve and Mike often face the problem of meeting the needs of two children at very different developmental stages (in their case, four years apart in age). Thus, Eve has sought out opportunities for Madeline that work for Connor as well. Yet sometimes this means passing on classes that don’t seem very toddler-friendly and often it means seeking out different play date opportunities for Madeline with other families. Thus, when I asked her once if she was “picky about Madeline’s playmates,” she initially answered no. However, after recounting a few experiences with school-at-home homeschooling families, she revisited her answer, “I guess that we are picky.” She quickly came up with the following explanation for why they usually have play dates with unschoolers:

First off, I don’t need to be saved. Second, unschoolers are usually around. School-

at-home families have these schedules, which are sometimes a little too rigid to make time for play. Third, if they're not unschoolers, then they won't be valuing what the kids do when they play as much as we value it. So they won't be valuing what Madeline is doing when she's playing...It's annoying for someone to say, "That's enough wasting time kids, let's go do something." And they are already doing something. I don't want Madeline to have to say, "Why's that a waste of time?"

Eve also added that these guidelines did not discount schooled kids and their families, joking, "Some of Madeline's best friends go to school. It's mostly about the parent's attitude towards what the kids are doing." Like Jill's more general take on other homeschoolers, Eve's detailed explanation resonated with the sentiments that many unschoolers express about finding companions for their families.

Thus, in order to meet her various family members' needs, Eve cultivated new social networking skills and has begun to serve as a node of unschooling activity in her local community. She "lucked upon" an unschooling family with four children who live up the street and with another local unschooling mother, with whom she regularly swaps child-minding days. She recently put together a small "Tuesday co-op" of four area unschooling families. In this co-op, the children always get together at one another's houses on a rotating basis on Tuesdays. The grown-ups there put out an (optional) activity based on their own affinities and talents (Eve puts out mostly science and math oriented work and enjoys that Madeline can "...do messy craft projects in someone else's house.") Each parent can count on three consecutive Tuesdays off.

Furthermore, Eve's concern that people solve problems and "have their needs met," (often manifest in her "it's about me!" mantra), shapes Mike's work/parenting nexus. For

while Eve is attentive that Mike get “what he needs so that he can continue doing what he does in a way that’s not stressful for him or our family,” (she makes sure that he gets time alone and for particular hobbies), she also places a premium on ‘family life,’ that includes her own well-being. This means that Mike does engage in a “second shift” when he returns from work at the end of the business day. As a consequence of putting boundaries around his hours and never bringing work home, Mike has traded off potential career advancement and income. On the few occasions when we discussed it, Mike expressed little ambivalence over this arrangement: “My colleagues don’t all get it, and I may not be the richest guy on the block, but I’m not missing out on [my children’s] childhood and we really know from each other and learn together.” In this way, he reflected the sentiments of many of the unschooled fathers in my study.

Local Community Leaders: Scott Mackler And Wendi Brice

Burly, bearded and white-haired, unschooling father of three, Scott Mackler always had a ready anecdote to illustrate his points. Like other unschoolers, Scott often told stories that critique schools to explain his motivation to unschool. He called the following anecdote, which also positions himself as a type of learner, his “Cream of Wheat story:

So this teacher once asked the class “What’s infinity?” Nobody could answer her, but the smart Alec kid, who raised his hand and eventually, she reluctantly called on him. His answer: “Cream of Wheat,” which, of course sent him to the principals office, where smart Alecs go. Later on that evening, the teacher opened up her pantry and happened to see the box of Cream of Wheat on the shelf. After looking at it, she wrote the student a quick apology. Indeed, staring at her was the image of

the chef holding up the cream of wheat box, which had on it a picture on it of the same chef holding the same box with more pictures after that. See, I was that Cream of Wheat kid, although no teacher ever apologized to me for anything [laughs].

Like other unschoolers I encountered, Scott frequently draws upon his own educational biography, a story of not fitting in to conventional standards of schooling and therefore as being constructed, by his teachers, family, and ultimately himself, as not being a legitimately educated person. Like other unschoolers, Scott uses these stories to generalize about some of the problems that he sees with schooling in contrast to unschooling. Because his father was a physician, his family held out professional aspirations for their son. Thus, Scott's vocational trajectory, (he became a carpenter by trade) produced some of the social challenges of being "downwardly mobile—at least in my family's estimation," as he puts it. As was the case with a number of unschoolers that I encountered, Scott consequently held a sense that schools and "society" often unreasonably expect people to perform in ways that are incompatible with how they think and learn.

Furthermore, Scott's ongoing experiences with unschooling transformed his identity and his perspective on "the entire system of expectations," as he puts it. He explains that, "It's not just whether or not "Cream of Wheat" is an appropriate or correct answer, it's whether anyone has a right to ask the question to begin with." In this way, he reflects many unschoolers' disdain for subjecting children to quizzes or other forms of informal and formal tests, mainly on the grounds of privacy. Yet Scott and his wife, Wendi Brice, did not simply arrive at this perspective by thinking about it. Instead, their sensibilities as unschoolers and their participation in their local unschooling communities have developed over time.

Scott and Wendi's unschooling experiences shifted their identities from peripheral (non-parents) to more central practitioners, to mentors of other unschoolers. I detail Scott and Wendi's story for two reasons. First, they and their children were key informants who

shaped my unfolding understanding of unschooling. Second, based upon my reading and in interviews with other couples who take on that role in their own communities, Scott and Wendi's experiences as local organic intellectuals in their unschooling community characteristically reveals how some unschooling families move from peripherality to centrality in a local unschooling networks.

Silver-haired Wendi makes her only scheduled commute every Tuesday morning at 9:30. She sets out a little early and takes the shady back roads, which she prefers to the more direct but congested traffic arteries that span the trip to the community library where she has led children's story hour for nearly twenty years. The aged, clean but un-waxed car resembles most of their possessions and the Mackler-Brices themselves. For example, their lived in three-story, split-level home on a three-acre lot in a middle class neighborhood, where I spent countless hours, has an understated quality: its comfortable, worn furniture and carpets are always clean and the generally quiet, orderly space provides a backdrop for family and friends of all ages to do their "work."

Wendi brings this low-key and welcoming energy to her story hour. There is nothing effusive in the way that Wendi reads to the children, sings with them or stands up to dance to "The farmer and the dell," or whatever jig the children request. Nevertheless a devoted following of children and parents regularly bypass their local libraries on the way to Wendi's story hour. Just as in her home, Wendi exudes a serious but pleasant demeanor, which shapes a setting, which encourages young people to participate on their terms without disturbing others. So babies and toddlers, for example, move about without sanction (from Wendi or from nearby grownups) in the periphery of the children's area. Accepted as a normal type of participation, this activity, which sometimes includes the removal of books

from bookshelves, rarely takes a disruptive tenor; it's simply treated as normal, in large part due to Wendi's attitude. Most children who come regularly eventually get interested in the stories and sit closer to Wendi's chair over time.

Wendi used to be a "big muck-a-muck" in the children's division of her town's library system. She made good money doing work that she loved and met interesting families. One particular family of "regulars," the Novak-Richards, caught her attention, not just for the "sheer volume of books that they regularly checked out," but also "because they were around during the day." Wendi soon learned that they were homeschoolers and over time she, then Scott, developed a close relationship with the family. They became increasingly involved with the resource center for homeschoolers that Seth Novak and Evelyn Richards founded in their community. The resource center served as a hub of unschooling programs, activities, and community in their region for over 25 years.

Scott and Wendi's involvement with the resource center started gradually, with Wendi stocking the lending library with books that she had checked out on near infinite loan privileges, from her library system. When their son, Alexander was born, Wendi cut back to part time library work. Scott, who had flexible work in carpentry and as paid legal, financial, and personal assistant to a wealthy friend, brought Alexander to the library to breastfeed every few hours. With the birth of their second child, Samantha, two years later, Wendi further scaled back her library work. Scott explains that, perhaps owing to the influential example of being around other unschoolers, they never questioned unschooling or their ability to get by on one income.

As their children got older and were able to participate in programs at the resource center, Scott and Wendi became regular facilitators there. A number of unschooling parents

in my study identified Scott's regular presence in the woodshop area as part of pivotal in their understanding about children's learning. For example, unschooling mother Elyse Locke recounted that once when she worked as a facilitator at the resource center, a child was struggling with how to build a ramp. Elyse began to bring her hands towards the little boy's work as she offered, "May I make a suggestion?" Kindly and firmly, Scott ushered her away, saying "No you may not," he encouraged her to step back and watch as the child figured out a solution to her problem, "...something I *never* would have thought up myself," Elyse explained, adding:

It was one of the most humbling and pivotal moments I ever had in watching a child learn...Scott was really great about showing me how to step back and watch and marvel and, you know, be available for safety and to help out. But only as much as a person wanted.

Other parents explained how, through Scott's examples and his explanations, they learned other unschooling mores.

For example, Scott made it a habit, which he invariably modeled to both children and adults, to solicit more information and reflect back his understanding, before proceeding to participate in solving any problem that a young person or grown-up presented. These were clear mores of the resource center, but I also notice similar mores for interaction among many unschoolers. Scott, initially a neophyte to the community of the resource center, became one of its essential, central experts. For years he worked as a facilitator in one of their programs for children ages four to nine and, with Wendi, often co-facilitated workshops for parents with Seth and Evelyn, both of whom Scott often described as his and Wendi's "mentors" in unschooling and their growing ideas about child development.

Scott and Wendi's participation at the resource center diminished over time on account of their family's changing needs as unschoolers. Scott stopped facilitating the morning program soon after his children transitioned into Evelyn's group-based "tutorials."⁶³ As their participation in the resource center community receded, they took on more central roles in a growing network of unschooling families in their community, including some families from the resource center.

For example, Wendi sought out and provided their home as the venue for an instructor to facilitate "cooperative games" with several other families. This solution accommodated the commonwealth's physical education requirements as well as the parent's preferences for cooperative sports.⁶⁴ Like other unschoolers, they co-oped with other families around other projects, ranging from writing workshops to language lessons. Thus, like many unschooling parents, they developed their social networking abilities in tandem with their children's growing needs for social interaction.

Additionally, like many other unschooling parents who had difficult personal experiences in their formal education, Scott's experiences in unschooling with his family produced within him an intellectual awakening and gradual sense of himself as an autodidact.⁶⁵ Over the years, he has cultivated many intellectual interests, including a deep

⁶³ Evelyn explained that she reluctantly developed the tutorials for older homeschooled children who, aware of their age-mates schooling milestones, were looking for something "academic-like without the school-ishness." (Interview with Evelyn Richards, July 17, 1999)

⁶⁴ Like many other unschoolers, Scott and Wendi and their friends have an enthusiasm for sports that rely heavily on team-work such as soccer and basketball. More specifically, however, they tend to be picky about the types of coaches and instructors who work with their children. Wendi, for example, explained that she was "One of those moms," who insisted on observing her daughters' dance and gymnastics instructors at work. "I'm kind of picky about how they are with kids and if that's not their policy, then we just find other places." Like other unschoolers, they tend to value the ability of such people to "Bring out the best in everyone by encouraging their intrinsic motivation, rather than through extrinsic motivators such as bribes, bullying or comparisons to peers," according to Scott.

⁶⁵ This, rather incidental artifact of a family's unschooling experience is perhaps the most unique and I believe, significant of my findings. I would not argue with a critical social reproductionist for writing off unschooling as a practice whereby people of various sorts of privilege ensure their children's continued advantage.

pursuit of theories of child development. Along with Seth, Scott cultivated a relationship with Harry Wachs, a developmental optometrist, who along with Hans Furth produced an experimental program (and book), based on Jean Piaget's theories of development, called *Thinking Goes to School*. From this work, Scott and Seth, in partial collaboration with Wachs, developed a "concept development" program, which Scott facilitated at the resource center for a while (he trained other facilitators) and continues to facilitate in his home.

Thus, for many years, on Friday mornings, Scott, Wendi and any participating parents (who agreed to work with Wach's book) set up stations around their house and yard, for different types of development tasks. The children would take turns at each station, where an adult would introduce them to the work, scaled up or down in difficulty according what they perceived as a child's developmental needs. The grownups try to discern children's needs based on how the child responded to a task; if they respond with frustration or boredom, the adult (or sometimes the child) determines that the task is "developmentally inappropriate" and requires scaling. In addition, Scott has extensively studied literacy pedagogy and has become the go-to person for many families whose children have had (or wish to avoid) difficulty with reading. In these ways, Scott, like other unschoolers has "read up" to develop his own authoritative and countercultural knowledge.

When their own children and their children's peers outgrew this work, Scott and Wendi retrenched. They turned their affinity and a talent for concept development work into a small family business in which they run programs in their home for area unschooling families. In this way, the Mackler-Brices embodied many of the developmental patterns of

However, unschooling seems to awaken an auto-didact identity in parents who did not have high degrees of educational capital or a strong sense of themselves as learners according to conventional school standards. A process to which those of us concerned with the possibilities of an educated, intellectually confident citizenship might more carefully attend

unschooling parents that I encountered. They got involved with unschooling through experiences with others; over time, they drew upon their experiences in raising their children (including practical matters in legitimating unschooling to family, the government schooling apparatus and colleges), to reach out with various services to neophyte families in the unschooling/homeschooling community.

Little Educational Capital, Growing Auto-Didactic Identities: The Jenkins-Lowrys

In the Jenkins-Lowry family, Dina Lowry unschools with their three children, daughters Ariel (10), Jessica (8) and son Bobby (4) while Bob Jenkins works during the day as an independent contractor. Both Dina and Bob came from upwardly mobile, working class backgrounds. Their attended stratified suburban schools, where neither partner “took much to school learning” in Dina’s words. Dina describes both her and her husband as “inquisitive, with really anti-authoritarian streaks.” Thus, Dina’s journey into the unschooling countercultural lifestyle was shaped by her experiences as a natural parenting and then unschooling mother incorporates many elements of her own auto-didacticism and social networking experiences.

Like a number of unschoolers I encountered, Dina became concerned about the potential harm of vaccinations and began to “read up” on a host of alternative parenting practices including alternative medical practices. She began to seek out resources in her community for these. At the same time, when she became pregnant with Jessica, her second daughter, she decided to quit her work as a house-cleaner and pull Ariel from Montessori school. Dina continued to seek out networks for unschoolers, both locally and virtually. Through engagement in these communities and their texts, as well as through her growing experiences as an unschooling mother, Dina developed a knowledgeable and confident

unschooling disposition. She also became, in her own words, “More of a learner.” Dina explained that:

Unschooling kind of forces you into the library, at least for a while, and you just get more confident at investigating things, whether its for your kids or about something totally unrelated. You know, the homeschooling is mostly for them, but it’s really been an experience for all of us... I mean, Bob and I are the real ‘un-schoolers’ in our family because we’re the ones that have to unlearn what schools taught us, you know that you can only learn what the teacher tells you or that you’re dumb if you can’t do well on the test. Our kids don’t know any of that. But for Bob, especially, [unschooling] has totally changed his way of thinking about himself as a learner.

Like other auto-didactic unschoolers, Dina and Bob see unschooling as a process of their own intellectual awakening and an awakening of their self-confidence and independence. For example, Dina speculates that Bob “...would never, could never, crack open a history book in school.” She speculated that because of Bob’s experiences in the “shop track” at school that he would not likely have “even imagined becoming a history buff or a book worm or the kind of dad who spends his weekends taking his girls to civil war battle sites.” She described her own growth of knowledge of alternative medicine in similar terms.

In this way, unschooling parents, like Dina and Bob, who had unconfident educational backgrounds, but who sought out and found support, often tell stories of their own “unschooling” experiences. These experiences have shaped their subjectivities or identities as both a parents and as learners. Dina and Bob provide telling examples of parents for whom “becoming unschoolers” represents a major shift in identity as an educated person. This is the case, perhaps, because they did not bring a high degree of educational capital to

their unschooling at the outset. Notably, however, Dina was “predisposed” to questioning and developed the skills, in large part through social networks, to do so. In this sense, Dina’s ability to activate and develop social capital worked hand in hand with her development as a “liberated learner” a term common among unschoolers that she once used to describe herself.

High Educational Capital, Little Economic Capital: The Turners

In contrast to Dina and Bob and like many unschoolers, Ellen and Eric Turner come at their experiences in unschooling with relatively high educational capital. While Eric works full – time as a special education teacher and Ellen earned a Masters degree in speech pathology. She worked for several years as a speech therapist in different institutional settings. However, Ellen retired soon after she and Eric began to open their home as foster parents. They eventually adopted and raised two teenage siblings, Olivia, who was away at her first year of college when I visited and her fifteen year-old brother, Jay. In addition, Ellen and Eric adopted as babies Jason (age 8) and Crystal (age 4). Ellen related their decision to homeschool to her experiences in becoming an adoptive mother: “I waited a long time for these kids, and I’m just not in a hurry to give them up.” In this way, like other unschoolers, she articulated a sense that unschooling helped retain familial closeness.

Like many unschoolers, Ellen gradually moved from a homeschooling mindset to one focused on unschooling as she immersed herself into her area unschooling community. In order to defray the cost for her son’s program at the resource center, she began to volunteer as a facilitator there. There, Ellen encountered dozens of unschooling children at work and a community of like-minded, like practicing families. Through these experiences,

as well as thorough additional reading of unschooling-oriented texts, she developed a greater sense of confidence and conviction in unschooling. For example, when I first visited their home, Ellen firmly stated that she felt that the lack of structure in unschooling would prove catastrophic for her teenaged son, Jay. Yet, through her ongoing experiences with unschooling, she and Eric came to see “rising out” (leaving high school) as a viable alternative for Jay, who had been flailing in high school for some time.

Like many unschoolers, the Turners operate on a “shoe-string” budget. Although their four-bedroom, split-level house sat on an ample piece of property in a middle class suburban community, the house had an extremely worn, lived in feel, common to many of the unschooling homes that I visited. Ellen supplements their income with part-time work as a transcriptionist. In addition Eric, at Ellen’s urging and through her growing networks of homeschooling families, works during the summer as a state-licensed evaluator of homeschoolers’ portfolios. The Turners rarely foregrounded their economic challenges. When such challenges arose, Ellen, in the fashion of many unschooling parents, often deflected them into opportunities to teach her children something about material goods, choices, responsibility and/or patience.

Maternalist/Stay-At-Home (Non-Income Producing) Moms; High-Earning Dads: The Maxwells and The Fields

In a rare number of families in my study, the father brought home a significant enough income that the “stay-at-home” moms neither sought out additional income nor seemed to spend much of their time and attention focused on strategies to save money. Although in these families, more so than in families where mothers took on some type of entrepreneurial

work or where fathers worked from home, the husband's work environment shaped how the couple parented as a team.

Thus, Karin Maxwell, who had worked as an architect prior to her children's birth, yet talked extensively about her family's "alternative" practices, such as chiropractic care, took primary oversight over her family's unschooling. During the course of my research, Karin began to turn her hobby of making specialty candies into a small business that she ran out of her kitchen and basement, her attitude towards the business, however was that it, too, was mostly a hobby, which she often subsumed to pressing family needs. At the same time, Karin's husband, Bruce, who owned a software business, enjoyed flexibility to work from home whenever he wished. Thus, while Karin had been the primary initiator and took primary oversight of her family's unschooling, she often talked of Bruce's "invaluable support," whether in material terms or in terms of his enthusiasm and hands-on care of their three children, Zoey, Caleb, and Zack (ages 8, 5 and 3).

Like some unschoolers that I encountered, the Maxwells initially began to homeschool because of their first child's precociousness:

We realized when Zoey was about 15 months old that she was a little ahead of the game. She talked by 9 months and had a working vocabulary of a 5 year-old by the time she was 2. The pediatrician told us 'Learning won't be an issue for her. All you need to do is make sure that she turns out to be a good person.' And we wanted to continue fostering her love of learning. That sort of led us down the alternative school route: to find something that would allow her to continue to blossom.

Like the Maxwells, many unschooling parents cite fostering a continued "love of learning," as a motivation to unschool out of a belief that schooling will stymie their children's talents,

affinities and ‘innate’ curiosities. Yet, when Karin emphasized Zoey’s precociousness, she indexed a debate within the unschooling movement over “special needs.” Some parents who, like Scott Mackler emphasize the extraordinariness of all children, disparage what they call the ‘genius child syndrome,’ which they believe uses a particular set of talents as an excuse or an apology for unschooling. Scott, like others who express this concern, often stated that he and his wife were “..trying to raise plain-old, average, ordinary kids.” While Scott had much to say about the capacities of “average” kids when they are “taken seriously,” claims such as his also elide the intense cultivation entailed in raising such plain folk.

As their family grew, the Maxwells continued to find reasons to homeschool around “special needs,” because their son, Caleb showed signs of autism by the age of two. Like many other unschooling families, the Maxwells marshaled a range of resources to seek out private support for their child’s special needs. Whereas the Maxwells had ample funds for this process, other unschoolers with less economic advantage often draw upon their networking skills through national and local networks and their own educational capital to advocate for their children and seek out resources beyond what local social service and education agencies provide for special needs.

Karin continued to toy with different alternative schools for Zoey. Like a number of unschoolers I encountered, she had pondered the area Waldorf school, which in her case was nearly an hour’s drive away. Zack was a baby at the time, and the commute felt wrong. Karin explains that she thought, “These little boys will be spending an awful lot of time in the car, and for what? Kindergarten? I can do kindergarten.” With Bruce’s growing support, they committed to a trial of homeschooling. While initially skeptical about

unschooling, Bruce's enthusiasm and participation grew over time, in ways that surprised Karin herself. She attributed Bruce's intense participation as an unschooling father to three circumstances.

First, exposure to other unschooling fathers, initially through their Unitarian Universalist church, then as they became involved with other local unschooling families, cultivated in Bruce a sense of fatherhood that was more engaged and confident than the models he had developed prior to exposure to unschoolers and unschooling. Second, Caleb's needs and the intensity of his treatments⁶⁶ called upon Bruce's increased participation in family life. Finally, as a business owner, Bruce was able to match his "family-oriented priorities," as he called them, to his working conditions. Bruce often detailed the "family-friendly" ethos and practices that he sought to develop throughout his company, which grew in tandem with his unschooling experiences.

While Karin saw no irony in professing the virtues of the "simple life" from her well-appointed kitchen in her affluent development (where the sign at the entrance to the gated community read "homes beginning in the low \$600[,000]s"), Vanessa Fields, a Canadian-born former computer system's analyst constantly navigated an ironically self-aware paradox

⁶⁶ The Maxwells went to Massachusetts to train in the "Operation Son Rise" program for autistic children. Karin explained that with the goal of "meeting the child where he is in order to slowly draw him out," the adult working with the child spends considerable amounts time in a small, understimulating space, such as a bathroom (see www.operationsonrise.com -check url). Such treatments require intense adult resources and although the Maxwells conducted much of this work themselves, Karin made it a point to emphasise how she had "No problem bringing help," into her home. Later, after considerable exposure to more maternalist and 'simplist' unschooling discourses, I realized that in this assertion, Karin positioned herself as a particular type of mother with respect to these discourses. When I later asked her about it she explained,

I cannot be one of these moms, you know the 'domestic divas,' whose self worth comes from being able to do everything by herself. I have important things to do with my kids but I cant be the only person caring for them or cleaning my house and if it's a choice about how to spend our time, I would rather just pay someone to do it.

Here again, while she frequently expresses gratitude for her financial circumstances, Karin often subsumes this awareness to the idiom of choice. For example, her disparagement of 'domestic divas,' gets at some subtle gender politics of mothering that are revealed in the divisions among stay-at-home mothers, yet it ignores the basic circumstances that most families cannot subcontract their domestic labors (CITES for politics of mothering; mommy trap, etc.).

between the anti-materialist sentiments and her family's materially comfortable life. In this regard, Vanessa echoed the sentiments of many unschoolers that I encountered. She and her husband, Mitchell, and their three children, David, Jason and Anna (ages 9, 8 and 4), live in an historic, grey stone colonial home, with a creek and an organic vegetable garden on their two acres. Their home sits in the middle of a tree-lined street in one of Philadelphia's oldest and most affluent suburbs. Like similarly-situated unschooling mothers, Vanessa often noted, with some regret, that part of the material trade-off of a comfortable lifestyle included less reliance on her husband for daily participation in unschooling than she would like. "All the talk in unschooling, is about families learning together. It would be nicer if my kids could learn more from watching their father work."

However, typical among similarly situated, fathers, Mitchell, who worked as a vice-president of a financing company, had a different perspective. He indicated that he felt that the flexibility of unschooling enhanced his ability to participate in his children's education. Mitchell compared his experiences with his father's and his (male) neighbors, which he described as "Effectively absent from their kids' lives, except for as a meal ticket." In contrast, Mitchell explained:

At least with the unschooling, when I do have these random pockets of time, I can really share my interests with them or find out what they're up to. Like I kinda doubt that my next door neighbor has a clue about what his kids are really doing every day or that it would occur to him to bring them along on a business trip, like we did last month...You can't just pull your kids out of prep school and say, "Hey, our family's going to Chicago this week and your kids out of prep school and say, "Hey, we're not interested in brining along assignments...I doubt that they

would even want their kids along, ‘cause they’re not really used to ‘em. I mean, our situation is not ideal, and we may have some strange hours together, but at least my family’s not on this crazy, treadmill life where nobody has any idea of what’s going on in each others’ lives.

Mitchell reflected the sentiments of many unschooling fathers I encountered when he assessed what he perceived as a heightened participation in his children’s education over his conventionally-schooled peers. Generally speaking, unschooling fathers positioned their practices as collaborative with their wives; they described themselves (and were described by their wives) as taking on a more central role in their children’s education than they would were their family conventionally schooled.

Notably, in all of these homes in which the fathers had primarily out-of-home jobs, the couples exhibited a gendered pattern of their intellectual division of labor in terms of their unschooling activities and how they described them. In each of these families, the mothers had initiated unschooling, usually after considerable reading, networking, and at times a significant experience that solidified their initial impulses to unschool. In other words, the moms were “left to do the research,” as Mitchell Fields put it. Yet, unlike in homes where fathers were around much of the time, I found that after I would spend the day with stay-at-home, non-entrepreneurial mothers and their children, the husbands would come home from work to detail the theories of learning, the intellectual goals and the theories of social life at the basis of his family’s unschooling practices.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ An inverse relationship between amount of time spent at home and care in explaining these pedagogical theories (to the anthropologist) seemed at work. This interactional pattern mirrored my brief experiences with Christian school-at-home homeschooling families, where fathers were often characterized as the “principals” to the mother’s role as “teacher.” In those families the fathers would come home and describe, as a principal would, the ideas behind what takes place in his home-school.

Defying The Two-Parent Model For Unschooling: Single Mothers Who Unschool

While the two parent headed household predominates among unschoolers, I encountered a number of single mothers who unschooled with their children. In the unschooling public sphere, single parents, particularly mothers, take on an idyllic type; they represent, for some, the possibilities that unschooling holds out for supposedly “all” truly committed families. The New Jersey unschoolers’ network routinely runs a workshop at its annual conference that focuses on the needs of single unschooling parents.

The very existence and viability of these families suggests that resources other than those of a financial nature play a shaping role in unschooling. Among the single unschooling mothers that I encountered personally (I had short interviews with eight in all), few had ample economic capital, (three held and used their professional degrees and one headed up a small business); most did not. Some mentioned relying upon extended families, a form of social capital of sorts, while others cultivated strong friendship networks. Several, like those represented in the unschooling public sphere, described their unschooling as taking place on a “shoe string” budget. These mothers told stories of seeking out work that could include their children and of engaging in co-ops for childcare, educational, social, and recreational experiences for their children. Most of them had educational capital or researching skills as well as active social networks, which they called upon to sustain their family’s economic viability in tandem with their unschooling experiences. Although these families do not appear very prominently in this study, they contributed to my developing understanding of the shaping role that social and educational capital play in unschoolers’ countercultural experiences.

In this chapter I introduced a representative sampling of my informants and detailed some of the routes that they take into unschooling. Here and throughout this study, I contend that unschoolers' justifications for their practices build over time. While unschoolers sometimes site epiphanies that bring them to unschooling, many arrive at unschooling gradually as a logical outgrowth of their early experiences in parenting. In the following chapter, I consider how unschoolers' early parenting experiences exemplify and set the stage for their ongoing development as countercultural practitioners.

Ch. 4. Early Unschooling: Parenting to Cultivate the Attached Child and the Countercultural Identity

..various cultural styles mold parents and babies in their first year of life together...

Biology might dictate a close connection, but humans are highly flexible so we inject culture into biology. In fact in parenting as in all human behaviors, the dictates of biology are often ignored, denied or overridden for all sorts of social or cultural reasons.

-- Meredith Small, *Our Babies, Ourselves: How Culture and Biology Shape the Way We Parent*

(1998 :2-3)

In this chapter, I consider how unschoolers make sense of and attempt to put into practice their alternative parenting philosophies in a “mainstream” world. The unschooling “care package,” to borrow from biological anthropologist Merideth Small’s ethno-pediatric model for the “cultural styles” that “mold parents and babies in their first year of life together,” constitutes a cultural construct of childrearing. How unschoolers approach early parenting reveals the workings of their countercultural aims to create an alternative style of living. Their parenting practices entail a particularly integrative approach to cultivating children into competent and humane beings. Moreover, their early parenting experiences pivotally shape their ideas and sense of confidence in their abilities as parents, their notions of their children as people and as learners, and their relationships to the “mainstream” world, including their perceptions of themselves as countercultural practitioners.

Through their early parenting experiences, many unschoolers, particularly mothers,

develop key dimensions of their educative principles and practices. Early parenting provides unschoolers with a basis of trust that their children can “forage” to satisfy their needs, as parents perceive them. This trust pervades the unschooling experience throughout children’s development. Moreover, as unschoolers engage in practices that they perceive as subverting mainstream conventions of parenting, they also come to see themselves as experts in their children’s well being. Their often-challenging encounters with others serve to reinforce these perceptions. Thus, for many unschoolers, early parenting experiences provide occasions to respond to challenges from neighbors, family and, at times, professionals. These challenges often call for unschoolers to draw upon and/or cultivate their social and educational capital as they hone abilities to “talk back,” and critique the logic of what they perceive as the “mainstream” parenting. These challenging experiences typically solidify for themselves the logic of their “alternative” practices. Thus, for many unschoolers, experiences in early parenting profoundly shape and influence how they construct themselves as countercultural practitioners.

In this chapter I seek to “unpack” the unschooling care package, i.e. the normative but nevertheless variably distributed and sometimes contradictory workings of unschoolers’ early parenting orientations and practices. I begin with an anecdote that illustrates what some unschoolers mean when they characterize themselves as living a lifestyle connected to their parenting philosophies. I follow with a brief background on the fundamentals of “attachment,” the style of parenting that characterizes the typical unschooling care package. I then consider, in turn, the various dimensions of how unschoolers experience each of the three elements of the “attachment,” (which include cue-breastfeeding, co-sleeping and baby-wearing) and how they make sense of these experiences as unschoolers and vis-à-vis a

perceived mainstream. To conclude, I consider how unschoolers' early parenting experiences provide a model and a starting point for the ways that they typically construct themselves as countercultural practitioners. I specifically attend to how unschoolers compare themselves to and lodge critiques of a perceived mainstream, and contend with challenges to their parenting practices.

I. "Living in Continuum": Ideal and Lived Conceptions of Attached Parenting

The Village And The Boroughs Are All The Same: Idealizing "Stone Age" Exotics In Brooklyn.

The following account of an encounter that I had with a mother at an unschooling conference illuminates how some unschoolers see themselves as participating in a lifestyle that they describe as more "natural" or attuned with nature and development than what they construe as the mainstream. When I initially encountered unschoolers at conferences and playgroups, I noticed that many of them wore their babies and toddlers in slings. Following a session on the history of the unschooling movement at the *Growing Without Schooling* 25th Anniversary Conference in 1997, I braved embarrassment and approached a woman who spoke English with a thick Israeli accent familiar to my youth. After some brief banter in Hebrew that established a pleasant rapport, I reverted to English to ask Anat Ben-Artzi about her sling. Like many conference goers, Anat wore her baby in this style of carrier, which she described as her "exo-uterus." Anat drew upon her experience of anthropology from college courses to test my credentials a bit before she explained the sling:

"You're an anthropologist, right? So you must have heard about Jean Leidloff's *Continuum Concept*, Right?" At the time I did not know about this foundational text for

unschoolers, written by a traveling journalist-turned- therapist (not an anthropologist), who wrote glowingly about the Yaquanna peoples of Venezuela and Northern Brazil. Leidloff's account of these "stone-age" exotics provides a problematic, but for many unschoolers compelling, perspective on comparative parenting practices.

Leidloff advocates that Western people should raise their children in closer alignment to the human continuum, which she defines as:

the sequence of experience which corresponds to the expectations and tendencies of the human species in an environment consistent with that in which those expectations and tendencies were formed. It includes appropriate behavior in, and treatment by, other people as part of that environment....The continuum of an individual is whole, yet forms part of the continuum of his family, which in turn is part of his clan's, community's, and species' continua...Each continuum has its own expectations and tendencies, which spring from long, formative precedent.

(Leidloff 1977: 25-6).

Leidloff speculates that people live closer to a state of continuum when their "innate" expectations match their lived experiences. Here Leidloff adopts a cultural evolutionary perspective. She draws upon her experiences and observations of Yaquanna peoples to characterize them as living largely in continuum and uses their lifeways as a foil for western parenting. Many unschoolers expressed an awareness of Leidloff's model, even when they could not cite her directly. Leidloff's construction of how parents foster long-term attachments with their children and contribute to their own continua of communal participation provides a model (albeit a model problematic for its romanticized constructions

of indigenous peoples' lives) for many of the parenting, educative and civic practices in which unschoolers engage.

As I did not then know of Leidloff's book, Anat seemed happy to elaborate what it meant to her in principle and in practice. I came to learn that the way she wove her perspectives on parenting and unschooling into an explanation of Leidloff's theories echoed how many unschoolers detail their lives and their aspirations for their families and communities:

So Leidloff spent time with the Indians down there, in Venezuela [and Brazil]. She saw that when the baby is born, he is immediately put into a sling. The baby stays with the mother in the sling, at the breast, and she [the mother] goes on with her life. The baby leaves the sling when he is ready to become a part of the village... He stays with her, in the sling or in her hammock, nurses whenever he needs to, and sees everything that she does. When he's ready to emerge from the sling...you know...satisfied... he goes off very independently...because he's connected and can explore and then come back. It's a very natural way to build up trust as the child finds his place in the world. [Leidloff's] idea is called the continuum concept; it's about people living in continuum with nature, instead of working against it. Much more harmonious that way... That's what we're doing. We're about keeping our children nearby, immersed in our busy adult worlds, until they're ready [to move on].

Anat offered more background on her family's lifestyle as another mother with an "in-arms" child in a sling came within earshot of our conversation; the other mother listened in and nodded to confirm, that her family also strove to live in "continuum."

Anat coordinates her husband and brother-in-law's moving business from their Brooklyn home, where her family unschools in proximity to "about twenty" other unschooling families. Anat contended that her family's unschooling, from their co-sleeping and baby-wearing, to how they conduct their "integrative" work lives as a family and "in our little community" felt "just like" the villagers of the continuum concept. She elaborated:

We really try to live in continuum. We let our children emerge from the sling and our home to join our world and work as they're able. You know, they're around me while I'm working at home and around our neighborhood. They're with us, all of them. So they get the message that 'yes, you belong here, you're not the center of the universe, but you belong. Now get to work!' [Laughs and vigorous nods from the other mother.]

Like other unschoolers, Anat effusively identified with the principles of "continuum" and her perception of the lifestyles of the Yaquanna village of Leidloff's description. And although other unschoolers are perhaps less specific in identifying their practices with one particular author or set of theories, I soon recognized that many unschoolers shared with Anat not only these parenting practices but also the ways in which she rendered them meaningful through a village epistemology. Indeed, unschoolers characterize attachment as the basis of their children's self knowledge, their abilities to "forage" for what they need through independent exploration, and their ability to integrate into the lives of their families and wider communities. Thus, before I consider these other dimensions of unschoolers'

countercultural lifestyles and educative practices, I “unpack” the unschooling care package. Below, I attend to the principles and practices of attachment that shape how unschoolers parent their young children.

II. Unpacking The Attachment Package: Principles Of The Breast, Bed And Back

The three key attachment parenting practices in which many unschoolers engage include “cue” breastfeeding, co-sleeping, and baby-wearing. Cue breastfeeding typically signifies a range of practices in which babies breastfeed whenever they indicate hunger signs, as opposed to feeding on a schedule. In addition cue feeders generally engage in child-led weaning, a practice that often extends the breastfeeding period beyond the American average of three to six months⁶⁸ to upwards of two to three years. Through co-sleeping, also known as “the family bed,” babies and children’s nighttime sleep takes place in or in proximity to their parents’ or siblings’ beds. Advocates contend that co-sleeping facilitates responsive breastfeeding, safety, closeness, and security. In “baby wearing,”⁶⁹ parents and other caregivers hold or “wear” babies, usually with the use of a sling, backpack, or cloths arranged in an array of different carriers, so that the baby or child literally attaches to the caregiver’s body. Many unschoolers wear their babies most of the time (including during naps). They often see baby-wearing practices as countering a what they perceive as a mainstream

⁶⁸ At present, ethnopediatrics has offered little in the way of data on the average duration of breastfeeding in the United States (but see Dettwyler, 1995). The US Centers for Disease Control collects statistics on breastfeeding rates in the United States. In its 2003 National Immunization survey the organization found that 36.2% of children were still breastfed at six months, 17.2% were breastfed at 12 months and 5.7% were breastfed at 18 months. The American Academy of Pediatrics, a mainstream health organization in the U.S., recommends that babies breastfeed exclusively through age six months and continue breastfeeding for at least a year. In contrast, the World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding for at least two years.

⁶⁹ I use the term “baby-wearing” here as it follows parlance conventional in attachment parenting and unschooling discourses. In fact, however, this set of practices extends well beyond babyhood for many attachment-oriented families. Parents often carry toddlers and children well into their early childhoods (most carriers can hold up to 35-40 lbs), depending on the particular adult-child pair.

approach, in which they perceive babies as held rarely, often only in response to cries.

For many unschoolers, these parenting practices create formative experiences that stand in a productive relationship with an unschooling education and lifestyle. They shape an alternative worldview, a sometimes-critical perspective, and an oppositional identity to what they describe as “the mainstream.” Unschoolers render each of these attachment parenting practices with meanings that extend beyond early childhood and into their lifestyles as well as into their educative principles and their practices throughout the unschooling experience. Below I consider, in turn, how unschoolers engage in these three attachment parenting practices and render them with meaning.

Cultivating Trust At The Breast: Precursors To “Foraging” And The Gender Politics Of Unschooling

Breastfeeding serves as an essential and normative unschooling parenting practice, which takes place at most gatherings of unschoolers and in unschooling homes with babies and young children. This perhaps explains why I curried great favor with an audience of unschoolers to whom I presented my research⁷⁰ when I stopped for a moment to put my fussy 4-month old into a sling so that she could nurse while I continued my talk. With the exception of two families in my study who adopted their children --at a late enough age when they could not breastfeed, both mothers took pains to explain⁷¹-- all of the unschoolers who I encountered in person or in text indicated that breastfeeding played an essential role in their early parenting experiences. Moreover, many mothers either overtly or

⁷⁰ At the New Jersey Unschoolers' Network annual conference in June 2001.

⁷¹ That these parents found cause to *explain* why they couldn't breastfeed their adopted children, given the existence of technologies and techniques to induce lactation for adoptive families, underscores the normativity of breastfeeding among unschoolers.

metaphorically referenced breastfeeding, particularly cue feeding and child-directed weaning, as connected to their unschooling principles, practices, and identities. Below, I sketch out these connections.

Unschoolers contend that through “cue” feeding, a term breast-feeding proponents prefer to distinguish from scheduled feedings, a child first learns, on a so-called “deep” or embodied level to “trust.” And trust forms an essential basis of unschoolers’ principles and practices. Many unschoolers see two types of trust that develop from cue feeding. First, they contend, by eschewing an extrinsic system of feeding (such as by schedules), cue fed children learn to trust or “tune in” to their bodies’ signals for hunger. Moreover, many unschoolers contend that, as the term “cueing” suggests, babies learn that their caregivers⁷² will respond to their needs. Babies signal their needs via a range of “hunger cues” that caregivers, particularly those who hold their babies often, become ever-adept at “reading.” They additionally contend that as parents develop the facility to read and quickly respond to cues, the child’s trust that her/his caregivers will meet her/his needs grows. Many unschoolers expressed a belief that this trust sets the stage for a collaborative relationship through which children will see their parents as legitimate guides and advocates throughout their lives. In these ways, unschoolers find the trusting dimensions of cue feeding to promote the intrinsic motivation, self-knowledge and collaborative, albeit evolving, relationships that define their lifestyles and educative practices.

Cue feeding also serves as the basis of “foraging,” a metaphor many unschoolers use to describe how children learn. The trust promoted by cue feeding encourages an embodied sense of self-knowledge and self-regulation. Unschoolers seek to cultivate in their children

⁷² This construction typically implies breastfeeding mothers; the extent to which other caregivers, providing bottles of breast milk “on cue” are included in such constructions varies.

what many expressed as a “knowing body” or, in wider terms, a “self-knowing” person, who attunes well to her/his own needs, such as for food, sleep, the need to move around, spend more or less time on a given skill, etc. Parents can trust this type of child to “forage” for what s/he needs, whether in terms of food or in terms of learning and education. The notion of foraging that operates in unschoolers’ essential conceptions of learning holds that under optimal conditions people will “tune in” to their needs and provision themselves accordingly.

Thus, unschoolers often premise this analogy of the well-nurtured and self-knowing child and adult upon a model of nutrition. This model holds that given optimal conditions (of time and an ample variety of nutritious foods as well as distraction from the types of foods that interfere with their internal sensors), people will seek out what they need to sustain their health. Moreover, according to this logic, the well-nurtured person who has been able to forage can deal with interference because they generally orient towards health. Thus, for example, the child who typically eats nutritious foods and has been allowed to tune in to her body will naturally feel ill if/when she eats “junk” foods. Yet, as I consider in later chapters, unschooling parents go to great lengths to preserve and protect these “instincts.” In chapter four, I show how they organize their home environments to produce “foraging.” Also, they curtail their children’s exposure to what they consider “junk” or interference and seek to cultivate or shape their children’s preferences, which I consider in chapter five.

Unschoolers express their ideas about learning in similar health terms. They contend that given the opportunity, i.e. a context in which to forage and experiences that have helped rather than hindered their ability to be attuned to their needs, these “natural learners,” children will generally, almost instinctively, know what they need to do at a given moment

and how to go about learning. As responsive adults, their role calls for them to produce such contexts and, in some unschoolers' parlance, "gently guide" children, mostly by example, to navigate these environments. Unschoolers feel this gentle guidance results from attachment parenting, for it takes place primarily tacitly, without direct instruction and through immersion in the activities of the family. This model of guidance, however, obscures much of the detailed organizational and maternal work entailed in producing such contexts.

In addition to cultivating a person who trusts in her/himself, unschoolers also attribute cue feeding practices to parental self-trust, particularly maternal expertise. They assert that parents who successfully and repeatedly read and respond to their children's cues develop a strong sense of their own abilities to understand and meet their children's needs. I suspect that these deeply embodied, oft-repeated practices, coupled with other dimensions of unschoolers' early parenting experiences, contribute to unschooling parents' sensibilities of themselves as competent experts who can anticipate and meet their children's needs more generally. This explains, in part, why many unschoolers take a maternalist or "mother knows best," stance in general and as they encounter challenges to their practices, specifically.

Although cue feeding presupposes a relationship of mutuality, most of the unschoolers who I encountered and read about engaged in child-led weaning away from the breast. Thus, "child-led weaning," characterizes another breastfeeding-related practice that stands in metaphoric relationship with other unschooling principles and practices. As with other forms of development, child-led weaning presupposes that children reach particular stages idiosyncratically. Unschoolers further contend that when adults push against these tendencies, they invite unintended, often negative consequences. Moreover, just as is the case with other "learning" activities, unschoolers see child-led weaning as unfolding through

fits and starts. Thus, I overheard a number of unschooling mothers joke amongst themselves, about “the first time” a child weaned, as opposed to when they finished nursing altogether.

Yet, the unschooling mothers’ lighthearted focus on children’s direction over the cadences of these weaning processes read through an idiom of children’s “needs” tended to obscure the mother’s (often considerable) role in the nursing and weaning relationship (cf. Blum 1993, 1999; Bobel 2002, Law 2000). For cue breastfeeding and child-led weaning requires the mother’s continual physical presence well into her child’s toddlerhood. I found the highlighting of children’s role and concomitant obscuring of maternal labor in these areas of breastfeeding proved idiomatic for glossing over of (necessarily) maternal labor in unschooling in general. This gender politic emerges as a *leitmotif* in the theme of hidden parental, typically maternal, labor that pervades unschoolers’ principles and practices of child-led learning and activity.

Yet, as in other dimensions of their educative and lifestyle experiences, most unschoolers are neither entirely laissez faire nor overly regulative in their weaning practices. Instead, they shape and influence their children’s behavior. For example, in my role as a neophyte childbirth teacher, I learned from unschooler and fellow childbirth teacher, Jill Peters how she advises her childbirth students about weaning. In a phone conversation, Jill told me that she explains to her students that:

There’s this window of independence at around a year when most babies will wean if you give them a little nudge—not that I or any of my [unschooling and attachment parenting] friends support that, but it can be done. I tell my students that after that [year], to expect to be into [breastfeeding] for the long haul. I happen to think that

that's best and so does [the] World Health [Organization]. I also remind my students that late weaning is way more common to our species, which [anthropologist] Katherine Dettwyler is always pointing out, but which the A.A.P. [American Academy of Pediatrics] won't wrap around their thick, sell-out skulls.

While Jill's advice relates to how to "nudge" weaning, it mirrors how some unschoolers manage the tensions between child-direction and parental input. As Jill addresses the range of weaning practices available in attachment parenting, her discourse marks some practices as more or less favorable.

Not coincidentally, many unschoolers like Jill draw upon their typically ample educational capital to comfortably challenge the advice of those in authority. When she dispenses advice and seeks to legitimate her principles and practices, Jill, like other unschoolers, appeals to a range of sources, culled from primary research as well as hearsay from others in her social networks. She also reveals the types of sources that she finds more and less credible. For example she considers the World Health Organization, whom she describes as "car[ing] about health on this planet," and cross-cultural, cross-species academic scholarship (such as Dettwyler's⁷³) far more credible and "less mainstream" than the "sell-outs" at the American Academy of Pediatrics, who do "take money from [formula manufacturer] Ross Labs."⁷⁴ Here, Jill reveals a bias, common to unschoolers, for what she

⁷³ See <http://www.kathydettwyler.org/dettwyler.html>

⁷⁴ In this instance, Jill refers to the "selling out" of public health information and policies on breastfeeding, which she believes that the A.A.P. engaged in order to continue currying favor with formula manufacturers, who provide financial support to the A.A.P. To support this position, Jill often referred to Naomi Baumslag, MD's 1995, *Milk, Money and Madness: The Culture and Politics of Breastfeeding*. Jill's abiding support of breastfeeding and growing critique of the A.A.P. also surfaced several days earlier, when she mentioned a recent report that revealed that the A.A.P. had halted a public service announcement (p.s.a) developed in conjunction with the Ad Council, which advocated breastfeeding on the grounds that the announcement was "too harsh." Evidently, a number of companies that manufacture formula had threatened to cut sponsorship and funding to A.A.P. programs if they ran the ad. (c.f. "Breast cancer prevention p.s.a. radio: The dastardly deeds of the AAP" <http://www.itebooks.net/Breastcancer/breast-cancer-prevention-psa-radio/>; "Formula Companies Play Foul

and a number of informants have described as “natural” or “cross-culturally informed” practices, research, and policies and against what they perceive of as the moneyed interests of professional organizations.

When Jill constructs organizations such as the A.A.P as “sell-outs,” she indexes a general suspicion among unschoolers of mainstream professionals and their organizations, particularly medical and teaching associations as well as their regulatory agencies.

Unschoolers often express concerns about the influences that they believe shape the advice and practices advocated by what many gloss as “the experts.”

Yet, unschoolers often predicate their rejection of the “mainstream” upon their typically ample educational capital. This capital endows them with abilities to marshal evidence that rejects what they perceive as mainstream and expert advice and supports their own alternative practices. Thus, an unschooler like Jill, who dispenses advice to others, collects evidence of financial influences, such as in her example of Ross Labs’ possible influence over A.A.P. guidelines, to discount those guidelines and cast doubt upon the advice dispensed by pediatricians whom they construe as mainstream.

Unschoolers also often suspect the motives and perceived biases of “bossy” professionals such as physicians, educators, accountants, lawyers and social workers. Unschoolers frequently express concerns that such workers disempower people and alienate them from the basic management of their own lives. Moreover, as I indicate in my chapters that consider how unschoolers manage encounters with civic and regulatory institutions (chapters 7 and 8), as typically well-educated, middle class people, many unschoolers reflect, and through early parenting, continue to cultivate, the habits and dispositions of people

at www.mothering.com/action-alerts/index.shtml. and “Breastfeeding Ads Vs. Formula Companies,” <http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art20892.asp>) At other times Jill, like other unschoolers, characterized the A.A.P’s relatively tepid endorsement of breastfeeding as “selling out.”

accustomed to exerting their influence and challenging expert advice. To some extent, they see unschooling as a lived critique of what many describe as “experteism,” the ways in which mainstream people and institutions rely upon expert forms of knowledge. As is often the case in the unschooling experience, when unschoolers engage in what they perceive of as countercultural practices such as extended breastfeeding, they develop dispositions of alternative experts who not only buck the conventions of the “mainstream” public, but also challenge the expertise of “mainstream” institutions. These experiences reinforce their countercultural identities and further cultivate the habits of people who comfortably flout conventions that they construe as mainstream.

Yet, unschoolers typically focus first on their experiences with their children to reflect upon the soundness of their activities (i.e., watching children crawl, walk, talk, and wean “on their own”). Consequently, most unschoolers echoed Jill’s preference for “extended breastfeeding” or breastfeeding beyond the first year of life and espoused child-led weaning on principle. Many saw a “peaceful weaning” as a benefit to children and relinquished their authority over the process to what they perceived as a need for their children. In the words of unschooling mother of three, Wendi Brice, “I figured they would stop [breastfeeding] when they didn’t need it anymore.”

Yet, “child-led” weaning serves as an early instance of how unschoolers often focus on children’s activity and downplay their intense adult, often maternal, labor. For example, I often overheard parents (mostly mothers) exchange tips on how to offer “little nudges” towards eventual weaning. These efforts to nudge weaning reveal that unschoolers manage to find pragmatic ways to overcome tensions between the principles of child-led activity and the role of adults in shaping those activities. When it came to weaning, most unschooling

mothers indicated that they retained a sensibility that emphasized the importance of satisfying a child's needs, however constructed. This emphasis on children's needs influenced how even those mothers interested in putting a closure to breastfeeding went about the task.

Thus, outright refusal to breastfeed seemed to make most unschooling parents uncomfortable, as it suggested an unwillingness to treat a child's request as emerging from a legitimate need. Instead, suggestions regarding "little nudges" towards weaning almost invariably included ways to redirect or change activities that might "trigger" a child's signal to nurse. Such advice included suggestions to cease lying down in the morning with one's child to read. Mothers also responded to requests to breastfeed but would "stop offering it." Many mothers instead put time limits, such as: "You may nurse to the count of ten." Others offered alternatives that they felt suited an apparent need, such as for closeness. I often heard (and heard suggested) some form of: "I would rather not nurse but we can snuggle for a while." Thus, the practices associated with nudges towards weaning revealed unschoolers' pragmatic flexibility and their general efforts to find a range of alternatives to meet what they perceived as the underlying and genuine needs.

Since these practices take place at the mother's breast, they often produce and/or reinforce her sense that she is the most expert and adept person to anticipate her child's needs and facilitate how they are met. Yet, despite providing a sense of parental expertise, often glossed as "mother knows best," such affective, embodied connections to child care tasks, predicated on a significant and complex emotional relationship with the child, can produce what sociologist Rhona Mahoney has described as "unanticipated creep" or slippage in such situations toward an expanded range of domestic responsibilities and a

correspondingly diminished range of outside options for women (1995 cit. in Law 2000:411). This was often the case for unschooling mothers in my study. For, while the unschooling fathers in the two-parent, heterosexual⁷⁵ households that I encountered typically claim that they consider themselves highly involved in their children's parenting and education, more so than they might have been were their family not unschooling, this tacit gender ideology, nevertheless, pervades many unschoolers' practices even beyond the early parenting stages.

To complicate these gender politics, most of the unschooling mothers I encountered identified themselves as feminists. They often framed their intensely involved approaches to motherhood through a blend of liberal feminism's logic of "choices" on the one hand and a maternalist ideology or "eco-feminism" that constructs motherhood as a site of domestically-based power on the other (c.f. Tong 1998; Hunt 2001, Bobel 2002). In fact, I encountered many unschooling mothers who described unschooling and their typical parenting habits as forms of feminist praxis.

As I have shown, breastfeeding serves as a metaphor for how unschoolers construct issues of the parent-child relationship vis-à-vis notions of "trust." It also provides an analogy for unschoolers' model of learning, known to many as "foraging." Moreover unschoolers' breastfeeding practices and how they make sense of them reveal the hidden work of powerful gender ideologies and some of the parental "nudges" that unschooling parents often obscure in their pervasive focus on children's activities. We see additional and related themes in how many unschoolers address sleep.

⁷⁵ Although I heard tell of a few lesbian unschooling couples, I was not able to interview any. One of the single mothers in my study, who identified herself as a "very busy and un-involved lesbian mom," speculated that the seeming heterosexual norm among unschooling and homeschooling families may reflect both issues of visibility and of paucity. I would defer to her assessment of mainstream culture and child protective [I'm pretty sure that's what the agencies are typically called] services as producing a climate somewhat hostile to "non-mainstream families" engaging in alternative practices generally and that for many such families, particularly those headed by two fathers, homeschooling would be "too far off the map" and would draw greater and unwanted attention to their families.

Co-Sleeping: Precursors To The Cultivation Of “Humane” Beings

“You know, “ I joked to 25year-old Claire Novak-Richards, one of my earliest guides in the unschooling world who became a close reader of my early work, “a realistic ethnography of unschooling would open with me waking up one morning in the family bed, with little elbows in my ear, or feet in my ribs.” Claire, the eldest of four siblings from an unschooling family, laughed over her tea. She added, “Or maybe, some kid nursing your elbow!” I laughed and added, “No, wait, how about, ‘My day with the unschoolers began with a thud!’” Having herself been pushed out of the bed several times by her own sibling’s flailing limbs, Claire appreciated this symbolic display that I “got it” about the relationship between unschooling and co-sleeping.

Like the many unschoolers, Claire sees the family bed as integral to her experience of growing up in an unschooling family. Like cue-breastfeeding, co-sleeping characterizes wider unschooling principles and practices. Below I consider how unschoolers construct and pragmatically enact the family bed as a way to meet children’s perceived needs for security and integration into family life from the very beginning. I also identify co-sleeping as one of the antecedents through which unschoolers equate their practices to the enactment of “humane education.” I also consider some ways that unschoolers respond to critiques about co-sleeping. These dimensions of their early parenting experiences both set the stage for other aspects of unschoolers’ educative practices and develop their evolving roles as countercultural practitioners.

At one of our earliest meetings, Claire introduced me to the matter of the family bed, which she felt “belongs in any discussion of unschoolers’ family lives...and not just because most people begin their days in bed.”⁷⁶ She explained:

[The family bed] is... well, this big part of unschooling, you know? For my parents I think it was like, ‘We can all sleep well. Our kids are safe and secure and peaceful’ and for us it was like...these messages of ‘Relax. You’re welcome here. You belong. Leave whenever you’re ready. Come back when you need to.’...It was really nice and accepting, which is part of what I think unschooling is all about. Like other unschoolers, Claire sees the family bed as a formative, affective symbol of the acceptance and welcoming that she associates with unschooling generally.

Attachment-oriented unschoolers contend, in the words of unschooler and attachment advocate Jan Hunt, that “Children behave as well as they are treated,” and see co-sleeping as a fundamentally ethical matter, which they often characterize in terms of “humane” or kind treatment, particularly with respect to babies, whom they construct as helpless (c.f. Hunt 2001). Many contend that through co-sleeping, children develop embodied messages of belonging and security. Many unschoolers construe these embodied sensibilities as the foundation of humane treatment, which they feel is necessary if their children are to treat others with similar regard.

As a consequence, many unschoolers identify the family bed as one of the formative sites of humane education, one of the ethical dimensions of their educative practices. Cindy Gordon and Eve Small, for example, often described their unschooling goals and connected

⁷⁶ Not coincidentally, many unschoolers actually begin their lives in bed as well. Much discourse about home birth (as well as home death) circulate in the unschooling public sphere (c.f. Moran CITE and single mom article from Hern), reinforcing a general and often gendered valorization of “home” in the unschooling counterculture. I revisit this issue in chapters four and five.

their practices in the idiom of “raising humane beings.”⁷⁷ Other unschoolers frequently alluded to this goal as well, although only a handful systematically identified what they meant by this. These parents typically identified how they treated children when they are very young in terms of compassion via “the family bed” and when they are older in terms of “taking them seriously.”

Moreover, the family bed encapsulates unschoolers’ ideas about an integrative family lifestyle and their efforts to cultivate in their children a sense of security as part of their educational philosophy. It reveals the importance that unschoolers place on children first bonding to their families before they connect with the wider world.⁷⁸ This notion of integration also pervades unschoolers’ beliefs about how learning proceeds. I consider in later chapters how parents seek to integrate their children into their home and work lives.

Like Claire’s family, most of the unschooling families I encountered had some form of co-sleeping arrangements at various points in their family’s development. By “family bed,” unschoolers generally mean that they welcome the entire family in the parent’s bed, although they also often use the term to describe siblings sharing a bed. Unschoolers frame themselves as distinctive among American parents of all backgrounds in welcoming their children into their beds. Yet studies of parenting practices in the United States indicate that more American families co-sleep in some form or another than had been previously

⁷⁷ Late in my research, I encountered a number of unschoolers who seemed very interested in the work of author, activist and teacher, Zoe Weill. Weill has developed a curriculum in the field of “Humane Education.” She describes the basic elements of such education in ways that unschooling parents often characterize their roles: (1) providing information; (2) teaching critical thinking; (3) instilling reverence, respect, and responsibility; and, (4) offering Positive Choices. (Weill 2003:31). For these unschoolers, Weill’s work seemed to provide an additional language to talk about their parenting practices and some of their consumer choices (which I consider in greater detail in chapter five).

⁷⁸ When I raised the tension between the need of the parents as a couple for privacy/intimacy vs the need for the child to have a sense of belonging in the “family bed,” parents typically scoffed at this problem. Several suggested that they made use of other areas of their home for intimacy while their children slept in their beds.

expected (McKenna 1999; Harmon 2005). However, unschoolers treat planned, as opposed to what researchers call “reactive” co-sleeping (Ramos 2002), for an extended duration (beyond toddlerhood) as a normative practice. This expectation for long-standing co-sleep contributes to unschoolers’ self-construction as countercultural practitioners. Thus, many unschooling parents joked about how the family bed fit into part of what Claire described as the “whole package” of an unschooling lifestyle.

For example, Vanessa Fields, mother of three, once kidded at a kaffeeklatsch playgroup of unschooling mothers and children, “Maybe one day I’ll grow up and won’t need a toddler bumper at the side of my bed!” to which she received a round of knowing smiles. In addition to anecdotes and jokes, obvious signs of co-sleeping revealed its centrality in unschooling households. For example, spatial cues of co-sleeping included a lack of separate nurseries or even baby or children’s beds. Additional, obvious sleep items such as toddler gates or bumpers on the side of parent’s beds, low or floor-lying mattresses or futons, toddler beds, bedrolls, sleeping bags around the parents’ beds, etc. all suggested children’s nighttime presence in their parents’ rooms. Less obvious indicators included children’s books, dolls, stuffed animals, diapering materials, bed-clothes and other sleep items in and around parents’ beds. The preponderance of these children’s items in unschooling parents’ bedrooms indicated that infants, toddlers, young, and even older children slept in or near the beds, even in instances when they had their own rooms. Additionally, many parents joked about “musical beds” to reference the frequent, often nightly, changes in sleeping arrangements within their households.

As a somewhat surprise data source, my own pregnancy during early data collection prompted frequent advice on infant and childcare. Such advice typically reflected

unschoolers' general orientation towards attachment, particularly co-sleeping. Unschoolers' recommendations on baby and childcare also revealed their ideas about child development, such as the notion of child-determined "readiness" to leave the family bed and unschoolers' ideas about familial integration. This advice also revealed the considerable pragmatic sensibilities at work in unschoolers' parenting practices. To this end, parents often balanced talk about children's needs with more candid talk about how their co-sleeping experiences enhanced their own abilities to get rest.⁷⁹

Unschoolers advised me, for example, to avoid, "that whole sleep deprivation thing that comes with being totally awake to tend to a baby at night" as Lisa Fitzgerald-Cola explained:

Imagine having your baby down the hall and counting on a monitor to help hear her cries...you would be half awake listening for the littlest noises. Then, when you hear a cry, your baby is fully awake now, you go down the hall, now fully awake yourself to take the baby out of the crib and sit in a rocker to nurse her back to sleep. Then you have to get her off your breast and get her back into the crib without waking her up –not an easy task, I hear. Then you have to get yourself back to sleep, waiting for the next cries a few hours later. That sounds like hell to me!

Lisa constructs this nighttime scenario as "typical" of the mainstream. Like other unschoolers and co-sleeping advocates, she sees the technology of baby monitors as unreliable and anxiety-producing and feels that that the entire cycle of early-motherhood sleep deprivation emerges from solitary sleep arrangements. In contrast, Lisa and many other

⁷⁹ A number of unschoolers referred to a type of competitive evolutionary theory that suggests that sleeping babies often wake up and disrupt their mothers' sexual activity, which they can sense through different pheromonal changes. [Again, how does this enhance intimacy?] She substantiated this with a secondary resource that circulated widely among unschoolers in the 1980s and early 1990s, Tine Thevenin's (1976) *The Family Bed*.

unschoolers advised me that co-sleeping was safer (as parents could feel and hear their babies' breathing), more convenient and, as it allowed for quickly-responsive breastfeeding through which mothers and babies needed only slight rousing, encouraged better sleep for the whole family.

To bolster these claims, unschooling mothers offered me a range of resources, from popular books, such as Tine Thevenin's (1976) *The Family Bed* and Jean Leidloff's *Continuum Concept*, to scholarly research on co-sleeping, such as the work of anthropologists James McKenna and Merideth Small. As with other of their unschooling practices, for which they oftentimes cited references, these mothers felt that these sources added credibility to their advice on co-sleeping.⁸⁰ When the unschoolers appealed to what they considered convenience and legitimacy, they constructed their co-sleeping practices as pragmatic and possibly sounder than what they perceived as mainstream approaches to family sleep.

As an ancillary to the family bed, unschoolers more often than not encouraged their children to share bedrooms, if not beds. In unschooling families, young children or toddlers often transitioned from their parents' beds to those of their elder siblings. Thus, many children's rooms had considerably large beds --often full or queen sizes--to hold several children or to accommodate the regular presence of grown-ups who might lie down to read with children or to help them fall asleep. None of the unschooled teenagers that I encountered claimed to still sleep in their parent's beds or bedrooms. Still, I heard anecdotes

⁸⁰ See the work of biological anthropologists Meredith Small (1998) and James McKenna (1990, 1994, 1995, 1995b, 1997 and 1999) for research on cross-cultural sleeping patterns and laboratory-based co-sleeping research, respectively. These authors offer their findings to both their academic colleagues and the public through articles geared for popular (1994) and practitioner audiences, which are then cited widely in attachment-oriented publications. For example, McKenna 1996 was written for a popular audience and was cited in Hunt 2001; Pediatrician Paul Feliss, writing for *Mothering Magazine*, cites all but McKenna's 1996 in his popular article entitled "Pillow Talk: Helping Your Child Get A Good Night Sleep" (available online at: http://www.mothering.com/articles/new_baby/sleep/feliss.html).

of relatively late transitions (such as children from ages seven to eleven) out of the family bed.

Unschoolers typically make light of any criticisms of their normative and relatively long-lasting co-sleeping arrangements. Many claimed to have abundant experiences weathering such reactions. To a parent, unschoolers who talked about co-sleeping insisted that, much like weaning from the breast, children would leave the family bed when they were ready to do so. Thus, Cindy Gordon, whose older two of three unschooling daughters had all “more or less” co-slept until age nine, once explained how she responded to a neighbor’s query, “How long will Celia (age 6) sleep with you?” Cindy’s flip reply: “Well, I’m not sleeping in a college dorm again and they’re not allowed to bring their boyfriends or girlfriends into my bed...at least when I’m there!”⁸¹

Yet, just as I heard unschoolers exchange tips on “little nudges” towards weaning, so too, did I notice that unschoolers exchange ideas about how to “help kids transition” from the family bed. Reading bedtime stories and parents “helping children fall asleep” in their own beds included the most repeated suggestions that parents offered each other. Most parents seemed to offer an “open door” policy, welcoming their children to come into their adult beds in the middle of the night. These practices provide another instance, common in

⁸¹ In the few times that parents raised the topic of teenage sexuality, they typically constructed their teenage children as having “normal” lives, including what they perceived as typical sexual development. More often than not, unschoolers often constructed their children’s lives as providing *more* occasions for the privacy to hang out date, court, or experiment sexually, that they perceived mainstream schools and homes as lacking. Finally, some parents as well as a few teens talked about unschooling as countering the “gender segregation” that they attributed to mainstream schooling. As 17-year-old Samantha Mackler, who for a while dated one of her “close guy friends,” once explained:

I think that after a while, most of my schooled friends stopped playing with boys and then they just acted flirty with them for a while. But for me, my *best* friends are girls, but I have some really close friends who are guys.

In this construction of “gender segregation,” unschoolers clearly were *not* referring to the *modeling* of gender roles but the types of social relations among the sexes that they felt emerged most often in schools.

the unschooling experience, of parents engaging in behind the scenes involvement in what they typically construct as a “child-led” process.

Thus, unschoolers characterize co-sleeping as meeting children’s perceived needs for security and integration into family life and as a pragmatic lifestyle choice. Moreover, unschoolers often identify co-sleeping with “humane” treatment and some conceptualize it as connected to their goals of raising humane beings. Moreover, like many of their other practices, unschoolers constructed their co-sleeping in ways that appealed to their countercultural notions of convenience. In addition, they often drew upon their habits of seeking out popular and scholarly resources to bolster the credibility of their practices as a lived critique of what they perceived as the mainstream. Finally, like other practices that they construct as “child led,” unschoolers sometimes employed strategies to nudge their children’s transitions away from the parental bed.

Back: Baby Wearing As Precursors To Integration And “Community-Based” Education.

A child with a full complement of in-arms experience will have no need to beg attention in excess of his physical requirement, for he will not, like the children one has known in civilized circumstances, need reassurance to affirm either his existence or his lovableness. (Leidloff 1985:85)

In their homes, communities and wherever families gathered as unschoolers, in-arms babies and children could be found perched at grown-up eye level on the hips or backs of their

parents. Babies and toddlers, “worn” most often in slings,⁸² comprised a regular part of most unschooling parenting scenes. Certainly, unschoolers are not alone in carrying their babies instead of relying upon strollers to transport them or setting them in bucket-style carriers and baby seats, both of which are common in the United States. Yet, the normativity of baby-carrying and the accompanying principles of integration form the third parenting element of how unschoolers constructed themselves as distinct from mainstream parents.

Baby-carrying exemplifies and facilitates the community-based dimensions of unschoolers’ educational philosophies. Many unschoolers contend that baby slings and carriers provide a “safe perch” i.e., on the body of the adult, from which babies, and later children, can seamlessly relate to and explore the worlds around them. They contend that the in-arms child can observe and gradually interact with the caregiver’s world from her or his “perspective” (height and activities). Many unschoolers maintain that children gradually have their fill of in-arms dependence and can over time join in some of the surrounding activities, first peripherally and then more centrally. According to this model of learning through integration, children begin to find their “own” work in the context of their environments. They begin by foraging around their homes and gradually move outward into the wider world –first with their families and then on their own. In this sense, baby-wearing stands in metaphoric relationship with how unschoolers construct of their practices as “including” children in the “real” world of their activities as opposed to the “segregation” that they attribute first to the playpens of mainstream parenting and then to the schools of

⁸² Please note that for simplicity of prose, I typically use sling-wearing as the cover term that denotes the array of carriers, ranging from soft and wire-framed backpacks to manifold types of cloth carriers that unschoolers employ to carry their children. I do so primarily because slings were the most widespread type of carrier among unschoolers and because they are often employed by the indigenous peoples whom unschoolers most often claim to emulate in this practice.

mainstream educative practices. Many unschoolers idealize how these processes work in other societies and draw upon a village epistemology in support of their baby-wearing practices. Baby wearing thus constitutes the symbolic and practical basis of unschoolers' ideals and practices of "community-based" education, which I consider in chapter six.

Consequently, "mainstream" objects such as strollers were a rare sight where unschoolers gathered, and families hardly made regular use of stationary holders for their babies, such as baby-seats, swings or playpens in their homes; and certainly not without some self-effacing explanation. Unschoolers also tended to wear their babies most of the time throughout their babies' wake and sleeping cycles. Thus, instead of putting their children "down" for scheduled naps, their babies often dozed in their slings, finding what many parents described as "natural" sleep cycles. These sleep patterns facilitated many parent's convictions that children are the best arbiters of their embodied needs and their opposition to what they perceived as mainstream practices that set schedules and agendas for children's activities.

Certainly, unschoolers put their babies down. Many would do so for safety, such as during cooking. Moreover, when active babies and toddlers signaled (via squirming and audible and/or visible signs) that they preferred to play on the ground, their parents responded by putting them down. Unschoolers' baby wearing practices contrast with what they saw as a mainstream practice of picking up babies only once they make particular needs known. In this way, unschoolers advocated attachment first, followed by gradual and child-led separation.

Unschoolers advocated baby-wearing on a number of grounds. Like other attachment advocates, the unschoolers in my study contend that holding is a basic

physiological, emotional, and social need for children. Furthermore, they often claim that baby wearing frees up adult hands while meeting children's needs. Such needs include contact and the various physiological responses (such as heart and breath sounds, temperature regulation, etc.) that it facilitates. In addition, they contend that baby-wearing provides calming rhythmic motion through walking and facilitates cue breastfeeding. As with cue breastfeeding, baby-wearing parents contend that the cumulative effect of so many cueing cycles in which children subtly communicate their needs and have an adult respond with near-immediacy produce a sense of calm on the part of child (for having her/his needs met) and a sense of confidence on the part of the caregiver in her/his abilities. These deeply embodied practices help produce or sustain the conditions through which parents see themselves as competent and "expert" in their children's well-being.

Moreover, parents who almost always wear their babies become accustomed to their children's continued presence. Consequently, they become adept at modifying many of their activities to include their children. In my own experiences as well as in the experiences of the unschoolers in my study and of other baby-wearers, children also become accustomed to the continued presence of primary caregivers. In other words, on a deeply embodied level, baby-wearing promoted conditions of integration, for better or worse, for unschooling parents as much as for their children. In the folk societies of unschoolers' village epistemologies, such attachments may seem unproblematic. Yet in a contemporary American context, they provide challenges, if not obstacles to certain forms of adult work, which cannot always accommodate children's presence. Thus, although baby-wearing sets the stage for unschoolers' efforts to include their children in their work lives, many

unschooling parents experienced these efforts as more or less problematic, particularly along gendered lines. I consider how unschoolers manage these challenges in chapter six.

As with their other parenting and educational practices, unschoolers employed a range of learning theories to legitimate and explain baby-wearing that exemplified how they often justified unschooling. For example, unschooling parents often contended that through baby-wearing, they eliminate the time and energy that they believe non-worn babies expend in signaling a need for attention (usually through crying) and thus promoted calmness in their babies. To this calm, unschoolers attributed additional learning theory, for attachment parenting experts contend that increased calm produces a greater number of periods of “quiet alertness,” a condition that some child development experts consider prerequisite for learning.⁸³

This theory of quiet alertness connects to unschoolers’ wider principles regarding the role of calm and a sense of “safety” in learning. To explain this principle, many parents often cited unschooling guru John Holt’s adage that “No worthwhile learning can take place in a state of fear.” They contended that mainstream parenting and schooling often produce various forms of anxiety that counter effective learning. In this sense, unschoolers see their practices, beginning with baby-wearing, as promoting the calm they find necessary for effective learning.

Unschoolers often blended these learning theories into pragmatic or affective justifications for their practices. For example, Rachel Berger, who parlayed her 11-years of experience carrying children, coupled with research skills and a folk expertise, into a vibrant baby-carrier sales business, would blend these types of “developmental” explanations with

⁸³ I heard this claim lodged with some frequency when learning and babywearing came up as a joint topic. See www.askdrsears.com/html/10/T130700.asp

affective ones. I once overheard Rachel explain to potential customers the “quiet alertness” point and some theories about how in-arms babies were often more socially responsive than those who “were put down a lot.” To this reasoning, Rachel then added that the “primary benefit of carriers is that they keep babies at perfect kissing height.” While most unschoolers did not have their justifications for baby-wearing lined up as a punchy sales pitch, they often shared with Rachel the capacity to draw on their own educational training and cite secondary, if not primary, resources when they felt particularly interested in an issue or were challenged by others in their social circle or communities.

As they develop their identities as alternative practitioners, many unschoolers become accustomed to conducting their own research in support of their practices and to counter objections. They often develop a facility with expert terminology (in this case, “child development lingo,” as Rachel calls it), which they largely cull from secondary resources. Many unschoolers also drew upon hearsay from others in their social networks; they would cite sources that others provided as authoritative countercultural voices. For most unschoolers, this level of alternative expertise is generally substantial enough to facilitate justification for and resolve to pursue their own practices as well as to develop corresponding critiques of what they construct as mainstream culture and institutions.

This blending of appeals to research, alternative ideas, folk theory and affective claims, along with a playful approach to their practices, characterizes how many unschoolers confidently justify and go about their activities. This comfort and confidence in one’s abilities to legitimate one’s practices not only reflects the type of privileged sensibilities or dispositions that often arise from ample educational and cultural capital but also forms a leitmotif of successful unschoolers’ experiences as countercultural practitioners.

III. Constructing Alternative Selves through Comparison, Critique and Challenges

“With all this parenting stuff...we began to realize that we’re not all that mainstream anymore. [laughs]”

-Unschooling mother, Eve Small

As I have shown above, unschoolers’ attachment parenting practices stand in a metaphoric relationship with, and set the stage for, many of their educative principles and practices. In addition, their lifestyle practices and conjoined parenting practices constitute a formative stage in how they come to identify and construct themselves as countercultural or engaged in “alternative” lifestyles. In the following section, I consider three pivotal practices through which unschoolers’ alternative parenting experiences shape how they construct themselves as countercultural.

Comparison: Legitimacy And A Constructed, Alternative Self Through Exotic Others

“You know, North Americans and Europeans are the only people that give their babies teddy bears instead of the comfort of family at night,” explained unschooling father Scott Mackler. He continued, “That gives the exact message of what this society’s about.” Scott brought up this point as part of another conversation in which, like many unschoolers, he equated “mainstream” parenting and educational practices with “materialism.” In this instance, the teddy bear stands as a symbol of what unschoolers like Scott perceive as the origins of materialism: parents give a child an object in place of caring from a person. The teddy bear scenario also stands for a wider set of “mainstream” socialization processes that

provide “the messages” or socialization practices that unschoolers find objectionable; in this case the substitution of a commodity over contact with other people. This type of critique of “messages” in general, and specifically about people’s roles as consumers circulates widely among unschoolers. Unschoolers commonly construct the mainstream as materialistic and feel that unschooling offers a people-oriented or “humane” alternative. In fact, as I consider in chapter five, many unschoolers engage in host of alternative and small-scale consumption practices that they believe restore the humanity to various consumer activities.

When Scott invoked perceived differences between mainstream Americans and other cultures, he echoed how many unschoolers and attachment advocates justify their practices on what they perceive as cross-cultural grounds. Unschoolers routinely point to the parenting, lifestyles, and educative practices that they believe take place in non-western societies as models to critique mainstream parenting, lifestyles, and education in the United States. Indigenous and peasant populations also often served as examples of natural or humane living to which many unschoolers espoused. Certainly unschoolers and other alternative practitioners are not alone in making “exoticizing” moves (Di Lionardo, 1998) that construct populations in non-industrialized societies as foils to mainstream U.S. and European practices (in this case parenting practices). This cultural imperialism seems to also take place among other types of countercultural practitioners⁸⁴ who often look (with romanticized eyes) to “primitive” societies, indigenous peoples and “exotic others” in search

⁸⁴ To explain why this penchant for looking to indigenous peoples for models of how to live seems to cut across many countercultural movements, anthropologist Jentri Anders (1990), who conducted a 15-year ethnographic research project among “ecotopian” communards postulated that, “...understanding what made [primitive societies] so stable might suggest directions to take in changing our industrialized culture” (1990:61). Grigsby found a similar logic in her (2004) study of “voluntary simplists.” While these emic explanations may explain the specific appeal of certain forms of “other” internal to countercultural practitioners, they do little to offer a more systemic theory of how such cultural imperialism works. Di Lionardo (1998) offers a cogent consideration of how anthropology and anthropology-like “exoticizing” of the other has grown up in tandem with other trends in cultural imperialism.

of what they consider more “natural,” stable, and sensible lifestyle practices (c.f. *Anders 1990-61*; Grigsby 2004; Di Leonardo 1998).

Although unschoolers often drew upon romanticized notions of the lifestyle of various indigenous peoples to legitimate their practices, I nevertheless encountered many unschoolers who expressed awareness of the manifold problems of this form of cultural colonialism. That is, they understood that unschoolers often extrapolate what I call a “village epistemology” or idealized notions of peasant village life into a suburban context. In this regard, some unschoolers tempered their constructions of their own practices with an articulation that they understood the socially embedded situations in which they, and others, at home and in the wider world, found themselves. A number of them would joke, for example, about the difficulties of “making a village life in the ‘burbs.” Others expressed an awareness of how social and economic realities circumscribed people’s choices in how to raise their children. Yet, many unschoolers seemed only vaguely aware that “the villages” of their imaginings are depoliticized, dehistoricized notions of community, more predicated upon typically colonialist notions of otherness than real places. Unschoolers thus reflected a range of variation in how they constructed their principles and practices vis-à-vis other peoples. These different understandings played out, at times, in specific ways, such as how they construed their and others’ lifestyles in terms of “choice” or the ways that they circumscribed their critique of the mainstream by targeting their neighbors in the (often homogenized) “middle class” as objects of critique.

Critiquing the Mainstream: Alternative and Morally-Charged Constructions of Mainstream Problems

Unschoolers commonly set their alternative practices, and by extension their identities, in critical relationship to what they perceive as the mainstream. Unschoolers also identify themselves as countercultural in the particular ways that they define problems. Specifically, they often critique the ways that people and experts in the “mainstream” define and resolve problems over childrearing and education. The following two examples provide insight onto how unschoolers take an alternative perspective on defining problems.

Vanessa Fields shut the door and rolled her eyes. A pregnant neighbor who had just left her home had mentioned that she recently received her sister’s “sleep bible,” Richard Ferber’s *Solve Your Child’s Sleep Problems*. In this popular text, Ferber sets out a sleep-training program for babies to develop the skills to self-comfort in order sleep independently. Ferber offered a structured plan, predicated upon ridding babies of what he calls “parental sleep associations” such as rocking or nursing. In his multi-night program (typically 3 to 5 days), parents gradually elongate, for up to 45 minutes, the amount of time during which they do not respond to their baby’s cries or other fuss cues. Ferber also encourages parents to pat their babies backs and speak to them rather than pick them up if and when they do respond to cries (1985 [2006]).⁸⁵

Vanessa’s neighbor’s sister was not alone in her adherence to “Ferberization,” which has been practiced by millions of American parents and has been widely promoted by pediatricians. Its popularity is likely owed to the fact that it taps into what some describe as an American desire to imbue children with independence from an early age (c.f. Harmon 2005, Small 1998). Although Vanessa later revealed herself to feel strongly opposed to

⁸⁵ Notably, after twenty years, Ferber has recently issued statements to the press that he never meant for parents to use his technique as a “cry it out” method. He has recently revisited his technique and in advance publicity of an upcoming revised version, he has stated that his technique is not suitable for all babies. (Harmon 2005)

Ferberization, she responded to the neighbor with an even-keeled, “Well I hear some folks really do like that book. They find it convenient.” When the door shut, however, she turned to me and pointed to my pregnant belly. She then re-framed the problem of infant sleep:

Solve your *child’s* sleep problems? Please, it’s more like ‘Solve *your* sleep problems.

You know, the ones you created by putting your kid down the hall in a that pretty little cage, screaming for you all night!

Vanessa’s response illustrates how unschoolers typically characterize what they construct as mainstream problems, whether in the parenting or in the educational arena. She suggests that this problem is both ill-defined and produced by adult expectations and activity. Here Vanessa notes how the fictive mainstream parent engages in practices (in this case solitary-sleep) that produce a pressing problem (in this case, parental sleep-deprivation), which, in turn, calls for what they see as drastic interventions (in this case “Ferberizing”). From Vanessa’s typical unschooling perspective, this scenario marks an instance in which the parents’ mainstream assumptions and practices produce a problem to which a child bears the brunt of the solution.

Unschoolers often extrapolated this logic when they addressed other parenting, development and educational ‘problems.’ My field notes and many of the dominant discourses of the unschooling movement abound with instances in which unschoolers characterize “problems” such as hyper-activity, ADD, reading delays, etc. as the consequence of mainstream assumptions, practices and expectations colliding with the idiosyncrasies of childhood, usually to the detriment of individual children.⁸⁶ Unschooling

⁸⁶ Such critiques not only abound in the unschooling public sphere, for example throughout the writing of John Holt, John Taylor Gatto, Jan Hunt, the Colfaxes and David Albert (see Appendix A), but also in critical education theory which looks to the ways that institutional needs often impute dysfunction to individuals. McDermott (1993) and McDermott and Varenne (1999) stand out as noteworthy examples.

parents often used the example of literacy attainment in this regard. Unschooling mother Wendi Brice, a children's librarian, for example, described two of her three children as "late readers," who did not come to full reading fluency until after age eight. Like many unschooling parents, Wendi assumed that children develop literacy skills, like all skills, idiosyncratically and that adults impose expectations on this skill development to the peril of children. Wendi explained this position thusly:

Most well-supported children will read when they're ready. Now suppose your child might have really been ready to get their reading fluency down by say, May or June or July or next year, but the school calendar says that all of the kids need to be reading by March. Well, now you have a kid with a "reading delay." And you can bet that someone's going to feel the need to intervene, which may or may not work and may or may not damage how that child feels about themselves and about reading.

So you have to ask, where did that problem come from?

Unschoolers like Wendi have a strong sense of where problems "come from." Whether in sleep practices or in other realms of activity such as reading, unschoolers defined problems through the lens of "meeting needs" as opposed to meeting other types of extrinsic agendas, whether for standardization, early independence, or material desires.

Many unschoolers contend that extrinsic desires and agendas interfere with people's abilities to feel satisfied that their needs (whether for food, comfort, or time to work out a developmental process) have been met. Moreover, that interventions to reduce the consequences of unsatisfied needs may produce other types of problems, as in the example of the Ferberized child who has been left to "cry it out," (and whom unschoolers perceive as experiencing detachment disorders) or the late reader whose self-perception or feelings

towards reading become altered through the processes of intervention. Consequently, unschoolers frequently characterized the “mainstream” as oriented towards other principles, whether materialism, standardization, or the “convenience” that Vanessa coolly connected to why “many folks like [Ferber’s] book.” In this way, unschoolers construct themselves as taking an alternative perspective on how they define problems and meet children’s needs.

In addition, unschoolers often justified their attachment parenting and other unschooling practices in highly moralistic terms. They used emotionally charged language to construct their practices, as when they compare co-sleeping to mainstream solitary sleep practices. For example, many unschoolers contrasted the “humane treatment” of co-sleeping not to the neutral term “crib” but to problematic terms like “lonely cages.” These emotionally loaded ways of describing children as well as how adults and institutions treat them foreshadow some of the metaphors that unschoolers use to describe other educational contexts. For example, they describe the unschooling home as a “haven,” in which children can “forage” or “learn in freedom” and, in opposition, characterize schools as “prisons.” Thus, in loaded metaphors, such as the “humanitarian” justifications for their parenting and educational practices, parents often paralleled the “abuses” of solitary infant sleep to the “abuses” of compulsory education. Many of my informants felt that these practices prematurely “isolate” children from the security of their families and the opportunities to learn from the “real life” of community. I consider these competing constructions of childhood and where older children belong in chapter six.

In addition to drawing upon loaded metaphors to construct their practices as alternative to the mainstream, unschoolers described their parenting and educational practices as “far simpler” than their perceptions of mainstream. In this way, they re-frame

many of the conventional problems of childrearing into what they perceive as simpler terms. For example, Dina Lowry once described this position to a group of neophyte unschoolers at a playgroup. Speaking of how she cared for her then eight-month old son, Bobby, she explained:

I can't determine when he'll be hungry; that's up to him. But I also don't have to sit around waiting for him to nurse. I just put him in the sling and get on with my life. We can nurse on the go, which means that he figures out what he needs and when he needs it, and I can accommodate him without being a slave. He gets the message that his needs will be met, that he belongs, and that he's not the center of the universe. The same happened with Ariel, our oldest [child]. It worked out for her eating and her learning: just by including her in the rest of our lives, she lets us know what she needs and we help her get it without being a slave to her needs and, for sure, her whims. They always got the message that their legitimate needs would be met and that they're a part of our world.... People ask us if this approach [to childrearing] is much harder... Harder? I think that fighting to get on a schedule and rushing around from place to place sounds pretty hard to me.

Like many unschooling parents, Dina connected “baby-wearing” and “nursing on the go” to other practices that included children, which allowed them to literally “hang around” in the activity of the people around them. Yet Dina's assertion of the “ease” that it takes to balance the different needs of her family members, i.e., accommodating her son's needs without becoming a “slave,” raises the question about the ways in which she constructs her own needs. Moreover, when Dina claims that she could “get on with my life,” she indexes a particular type of socially situated life that can accommodate the inclusion of children. In

these ways, unschoolers like Dina often focus on the conditions of their children's lives and downplay both their own work in producing these conditions as well as the privileges that give rise to their lifestyles.

Like many unschoolers, Dina equates an "attached" approach to childrearing with putting children "near the center of the action," i.e., as peripheral participants in the activity that surrounds them. She contrasted this involvement to her "mainstream" peers' and neighbors' practices of separating their children from their everyday activities, which she saw as a way that these adults produce "educational" needs in their children. As she explained to a group of unschooling mothers in a kaffeeklatsch:

They have this idea that it's better to put your child in a crib or a playpen full of 'developmental' toys, you know, or where they can watch an 'educational' video like *Baby Einstein*, you know, for their brain development than to have your baby on you... They think that's somehow more valuable [for the baby] than to let her learn by playing in her actual, real-life environment. You know, with the cooking and the gardening and the other kids and the pots and pans and whatever. Do you think Einstein watched videos all day? [laughs from the other mothers].

Here Dina contrasts imagery of a child in a playpen with toys and videos developed by experts in brain development with an unschooled child caught up in the familial activity around her, who engages in the "whatever" in her environment that attracts her own attention. Like other unschoolers, Dina sees such parenting practices as connected to mainstream educative principles and practices, which they find to be relatively isolating, inauthentic and/or passive experiences organized around consumption (taking in the video, for example) and driven by expertise outside of the child and family. These approaches to

basic parenting and lifestyle practices have much to do with how unschoolers construct education in their movement as well as in the “mainstream” more widely.

Through these opposing constructions of childrearing and education, unschoolers both flout practices they perceive as mainstream and oppose what they perceive as dominant ideologies. These constructions of the mainstream and their own often morally-charged frameworks for their alternative practices contribute to unschoolers’ overall constructions of themselves, in oppositional terms, as countercultural practitioners. These perspectives and self-constructions also provide a framework for how unschoolers address challenges to their practices, as I consider below.

Talking Back: Contending With Challenges And Cultivating An Alternative Expertise

Many of the unschoolers I encountered claim that they have little concern for other people’s opinions of their practices. Nevertheless, they had many ready responses, which they often share with each other, to counter challenges from “mainstream” family members, neighbors, or professionals. As I suggested earlier, unschoolers feel that their parenting practices challenge what they construe as mainstream norms. Most unschooling parents claimed to have weathered some type of challenge to their parenting practices that steeled them for later challenges to their educational practices and countercultural lifestyles. Their responses to these challenges shaped their construction of themselves as countercultural.

Unschoolers typically encountered “dominant” or mainstream messages and about parenting and challenges to their practices from media, family, friends, neighbors, and various care-giving experts, including pediatricians. For many unschoolers, challenges from

family members and others towards their parenting practices signaled an ongoing process that would continue across their unschooling experiences. Attachment parenting practices, for example, signified a considerable departure from the ways in which many unschoolers and or/ their spouses were themselves raised. These differences often produced conflicts with extended family. Parents construed and responded to such challenges in a range of ways. For example some characterized the concerns of family members, neighbors, and others as well-meaning, while others saw challenges to their parenting and unschooling as ignorant or hostile. They would respond in kind, with humor, or with efforts to “educate” the people who challenged them.

In addition, unschoolers’ early encounters with care-giving professionals set the stage for later encounters with educational practitioners and agents of the state such as school district officials whose work and expertise focus upon children’s welfare. Many unschoolers experienced challenging interactions with professionals even before their children’s births; I encountered a high proportion of unschoolers who engaged in alternative birth practices, such as midwifery care, birth centers, and home birth. These experiences, which challenge “mainstream” or biomedical constructions of birth, accustomed these parents to confronting mainstream institutions and practitioners. For many unschoolers, such habits continued as their children grew. For example, a number of parents in my study indicated that they found themselves challenging their pediatricians over such issues as whether and to what extent to vaccinate their children. These parents drew upon alternative systems of knowledge and social networks as well as confident dispositions to counter mainstream and expert advice on a wide range of issues.

In addition to challenging expert advice, many unschoolers found themselves challenged and even berated by pediatricians for various practices, such as extended breast feeding and co-sleeping. To counter their doctor's perspectives in these instances, unschooling parents called upon their research skills, which their educational experiences accorded them, and which they, in turn, cultivated through justifying their experiences as alternative practitioners. Karin Maxwell, unschooling mother of three, recounted one such situation:

When my doctor yelled at me in front of the medical student that I was increasing my baby's chance for SIDS [Sudden Infant Death Syndrome] by letting her sleep in my bed, just like a recent A.A.P. statement suggested, I went home and made her a little packet of research that showed that she was totally wrong. There are mounds of evidence to suggest that co-sleeping is safer [than solitary sleep]. I also let her know that I thought that it was illinformed to go around parroting poorly conducted research findings that are released at the Juvenile Products Manufacturer's Association convention, where that last pro-crib edict came from. Then I told her that she ought not yell at patients in front of students. Then I wished her luck as she won't be seeing us again.

Like Karin, many unschoolers constructed their pediatrician's convictions as biased and as based upon non-credible evidence. In moves similar to how they later seek out resources, many unschooling parents like Karin drew upon a range of information, culled from social networking, secondary, and primary research, to face challenges. Moreover, like Karin, many felt emboldened to challenge their pediatricians' expertise, "talk back," or respond to these experts and seek out alternative arrangements.

Unschoolers engaged in other strategies to deal with pediatricians that mirror later dealings with "experts." Some parents indicated that they simply ignored pediatricians' recommendations, lied, or withheld information about their own practices, or simply re-framed their relationships to such experts. For example, I often overheard Rachel Berger explain to other mothers, "I go to pediatricians for medical advice, not for parenting decisions, which are private." Many simply drew upon referrals from other like-minded parents and changed to practitioners whom they perceived as more supportive. In these ways, unschooling parents marshaled the ability to activate or call upon social and educational capital to make choices that conformed to their preferences.

These responses to difficulties with pediatricians reveal how unschoolers enjoy the type of privileged ease with the "system" that comes with ample cultural, educational, social and/or economic capital. These early alternative parenting experiences provide many unschoolers with an occasion to cultivate, and for many to "activate" (in Lareau's CITE parlance), their social and educational capital. For example, unschoolers often called upon their own alternative sources of knowledge as well as skills cultivated through their educational experiences to manage interactions with experts. These dispositions would later emerge in the ways that unschooling parents dealt with analogous encounters with other

institutions in their communities (as I consider in chapter six) and with the agents of the state (as I consider in chapter seven). To counter real and perceived objections to their practices as well as to cultivate their alternative dispositions, unschooling parents armed themselves with information that provided new voices of authority.

Thus, I encountered a considerable number of instances in which parents comfortably engaged in research to meet their family's needs, such as when they needed to understand how to grow tomato plants, learn the fine details of mathematics pedagogy, or know their rights with respect to local homeschooling ordinances. In an additional and related set of processes, many parents either develop or draw upon latent habits of research (whether primary, secondary, or in drawing upon the expert knowledge of other parents) to articulate, and at times legitimate, the rationales for their praxis. This countercultural knowledge and privileged take on the "system" emboldens unschoolers to discount expert advice, to "talk back" to various types of experts, and to contend with challenges from naysayers.

In essence, then, the challenges that some unschoolers encountered in their early parenting experiences set the stage for their countercultural dispositions. These experiences bolstered unschoolers' alternative identities and cultivated their sense of themselves as the primary experts on their children's well-being. These dispositions and social resources shape how many unschoolers see themselves and manage encounters vis-a-vis the "mainstream" as they go forward in their unschooling lifestyles and educational experiences.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter, I considered the unschooling “care package,” i.e., unschoolers’ countercultural construct of childrearing, particularly early childrearing. Specifically, I considered how unschoolers make sense of and attempt to put into practice their alternative parenting philosophies in what they perceive of as a “mainstream” world. Unschoolers’ early, typically gendered parenting experiences reflect and shape their ideas about their abilities as parents, their notions of their children as people and as learners, and their relationships to the “mainstream” world, including their perceptions of themselves as countercultural practitioners and experts in the care of their children.

I also contended that through these experiences, which often produce and reinforce a maternalist ideology, unschooling parents develop key educational principles and practices. These included what they often describe as a “trust” in their children, particularly with respect to their children’s abilities as autodidacts who can “forage” for their perceived needs and a sensibility of unschooling as a practice of “humane” treatment and education.

I also showed how unschoolers' experiences in early parenting shape and influence how they construct themselves as countercultural practitioners. I considered how for many unschoolers, early parenting experiences provide occasions to reframe what they see as mainstream problems and respond to challenges from neighbors, family, and, at times, professionals. In so doing, they often call upon and develop new forms of educational and social capital. Such encounters often solidify for themselves the logic of their countercultural practices. Unschoolers' challenging encounters with others, coupled with an ability to marshal their educational and social networks to produce an alternative expertise, serve as early training for how they contend with other challenges to their unschooling over time.

Now that I have established unschoolers' early parenting experiences as formative and exemplary of key dimensions of their countercultural principles and practices, I will discuss other lifestyle dimensions as they are manifest through some of the more overtly "educative" contexts of unschooling. In the following chapter, I consider the lifestyle dimensions of time, space, and adult-child interactions as unschoolers produce the home as a contexts for "foraging," i.e., environments that they construe as places in which their children can grow and learn.

Ch 5. An 'Educational' Environment In Which To Forage And Become Competent

A child's curiosity and desire to do things himself are the definition of his capacity to learn without sacrificing any part of his whole development.... The price a child pays for being guided into what his parents think is best for him (or themselves) is the diminution of his wholeness...His elders...cannot add anything to his wholeness by substituting their motives for his own, or "telling him what to do" (Leidloff 1985:85).

...to understand the power of domestic space as a social construct, one must look beyond ritual action and grand cosmological belief systems into the practical actions of daily life (Pader 1993:1).

Unschooling homes serve, among many things, as context for their educative practices. As I detailed in chapter four, unschoolers' parenting practices dovetail with a model of learning that many unschoolers characterize in terms of "foraging." Unschoolers often premise this analogy upon a model of nutrition that holds that given optimal conditions (of time and an ample variety of nutritious foods), people will provision themselves with what they need to sustain a "healthy" body. In the counterculturally constructed notion of an unschooled person, this typically means that someone who is "competent" and "compassionate" emerges as the result of being "nurtured" in an environment conducive to such foraging. In this chapter, I consider how unschoolers accomplish their countercultural lifestyle through a distinct temporal, spatial and interactional use of their homes. I also consider how unschoolers make sense of their own practices and set their practices in opposition to their mainstream counterparts.

The Leidloff passage that I quoted above encapsulates how many unschoolers feel about intense guidance: that it diminishes a child's wholeness. This sensibility pervades how

unschoolers live in their homes as spaces conducive to their children's independent, competent foraging. Yet, unschoolers' lived experiences, as well as how they make sense of them intrinsically and vis-à-vis a constructed mainstream, reveal that parents *do* shape their children's experiences through of the ordering of their environments, through other considerable parental labors, and as a consequence of distinct forms of privilege. Specifically, unschoolers often speak about children's learning as though it arises "naturally" when given a "nourishing" environment, yet they typically downplay the considerable work that they put into creating such environments.

Such work ranges from the overt work of economically sustaining and daily managing such environments, constructing and re-configuring them to accommodate children's foraging and competence as they grow, and rendering these practices as sensible and educative, in an alternative sensibility. Sustaining these efforts, then, are the workings of various types of economic, educational, and cultural capital as well as intense, often hidden, parental labor.

While the economics of sustaining a home in which an adult must be on hand to at least supervise children's activity may seem somewhat obvious, the types of educational and social capital at work in these environments is perhaps less so. Educational- and cultural-capital infuse the symbolic and enacted dimensions of unschoolers' alternative lifestyles as well as how they render them meaningfully educative. As I suggest in chapter four, intense parental labor also underlies the construction of an unschooling lifestyle, particularly in its home-based dimensions; such work typically takes form along traditional gender norms. Unschoolers typically balk at the notion that they might be (re)producing traditional gender roles through their lifestyles. Yet, a powerful alchemy obscures the workings of these

underlying processes. This obfuscation arises through a combination of unschoolers' focus on children's activities as well as the material needs (first and foremost the additional domestic labor that often accompanies getting by on one primary income in a two-income world) that arise for most unschooling families. It is further amplified by the maternalist ideologies that many unschoolers cultivate through their parenting practices, as I considered in chapter four.

I explore the workings of these processes in the following manner. I first provide a brief orientation to the dimensions of lifestyle that I draw upon for the remainder of the chapter. I then present a number of unschoolers' domestic practices through the concepts of time and space, since these suffuse both unschoolers' ideas about competence and foraging as well as how they make sense of them vis-à-vis the "mainstream". I then revisit my premise that unschoolers' principles and practices obscure the various types of socio-cultural work (parental labors and forms of privilege) that buttress how they create their homes as educational environments.

I. Space And Time In Home-Based Praxis

Enculturation processes dynamically implicate the ways in which people use and organize their spaces, which are bounded by, and mutually constitutive of, time (Pader 1988 see also Pellow et al 1996). Specifically, as Pierre Bourdieu noted, the home serves as one of the principal loci for the construction of the habitus (1979). Bourdieu asserted that people learn, from infancy onward, about social relations and local worldviews largely through daily actions and movements within their domestic space (1979; as discussed in Pader 1993:133). People concretely understand these dimensions of social life through meaningful connections among people, objects, and space, which they continually re-make in and

through the everyday world (c.f. Munn 1992:116). Such connections also incorporate people in wider, socio-cultural systems outside of the home. For as anthropologist of space and time, Nancy Munn, suggests:

authority over...chronological instruments like clock time, not only controls aspects of the everyday lives of persons but also connects this level of control to a more comprehensive universe that entails critical values and potencies in which governance is grounded (1992:109).

Unschoolers' experience distinctive, countercultural temporalities and spatial practices. Their daily lives reflect efforts to challenge what they perceive as the external regulations -- "controls" in their parlance-- that they believe reach into the bodies and lives of mainstream people. Throughout the discussion below, I illustrate how unschoolers pit their principles and practices in opposition to what they perceive as the temporal regulatory mechanisms (such as the school calendar) and spatial organization (like conventional classrooms) of mainstream culture and education. Thus, the practical actions and movements of daily life within an unschooling home provide a context to consider how members of unschooled families learn about the "social relations and local worldviews" of their countercultural lifestyles and set them as distinct from the constructed mainstream.

The Feel Of An Unschooling Home

I'm finding that unschoolers share many jokes about what items their homes typically have or lack. I've seen a fair number of walls taken over floor-to-ceiling with bookcases (with special shelves dedicated to the dozens of library books borrowed weekly and for books on unschooling, or natural and non-violent parenting or rather "education" topics like "Kitchen Math"). Many homes have compost piles, pantries with bulk-purchased

dry-goods, backyard and indoor clotheslines, cloth diapering pails, potties in the kitchen, solar-panels, gasohol-converted vans (I've seen two so far), scores of open shelving, 'invention boxes' filled with items for children to discover as toys (instead of commercially produced toys), hand-loom and craft tools of all sorts, rows of vegetable gardens, fruit dryers, organic foods and body products, child-sized tools, etc. Each of these material artifacts fit into a symbolic order that captures an unschooling Zeitgeist of simplicity, creativity, thriftiness and do-it-yourself, homemade fun.

Yet it's not just the "stuff" that distinguishes these homes. Unschoolers' homes have a distinctive feel — calm, even when noisy (often) and busy (always), kids and their activities seem welcomed. Perhaps because things, "tools" are used with frequency, and "important" work is often left out for more use, this activity can generate a lot of mess. Still, an overall sense of internal organization runs through these homes; it's not a precious kind of orderliness ("We're no Pottery Barn Kids here!" Vanessa Fields asserted just the other day), but stuff generally has a place where it belongs -- usually somewhere within kids' reach. People in these homes, however young and regardless of whether they live there, can usually help themselves to things like food and supplies [which often spells more mess, but kids do seem to clean up after themselves...sometimes]. I'm learning to refrain from offering help to kids; it's kind of expected that people help themselves and will ask for help if they want it.

A lot seems to be going on at once, with folks "working" near each other; also, everything seems to "hang together," even though at first it doesn't seem like the adults are directing the activities of the household very much. Rachel [Berger] joked the other day, "the only thing I initiate in my house is laundry!" That's probably quite an overstatement: She said this before asking her kids when [not if] they'd be ready to read the weekly Torah reading...So, I think there may be more "initiating" than meets the eye.

(From summary field notes after 10 home visits, August 1998)

I discovered early in my fieldwork that unschoolers' homes feel distinctive from their neighbors and even from school-at-home-homeschoolers. As the backdrop for their alternative lifestyles, many unschoolers seek to construct their homes as "havens" of trust in their families' integrative and idiosyncratic learning (Moran 1997).⁸⁷ This suggests that unschoolers conceptualize their homes as spaces to cultivate what they value; i.e., an unschooling lifestyle and unschooled children. They also conceptualize their homes in opposition to "schooling,"⁸⁸ a broadly constructed notion that condenses what they find objectionable about mainstream lifestyles and educational practices. Varied as the circumstances of each family, unschoolers' homes nevertheless share common features. These include distinctive tempos, spatial orderings, activities, and interactional norms, through which unschoolers cultivate in their children the habits of becoming competent foragers.

II. "Making A Life With Children": Children's and Parents' Peripherality in Unschooled Family Dynamics

Unschooling children seem to move through their homes with a sense of purpose drawn from ideas that emerge from stimuli within the environment. They themselves produce the connections in their activities, often circling back to an initial purpose, but just as often moving onto the next project. Their activities sometimes take brief moments, hours or days;

⁸⁷Here I borrow a turn of phrase from unschooling mother and author Victoria Moran. Moran presented her keynote address, "Shelter for the Spirit: Making Your Home A Haven For Your Heart" at the New Jersey Unschoolers Network Conference in 1998. Her book *Shelter for the Spirit: Create Your own Haven in a Flectic World*, (1997) deals with homeschooling as one of the sites of recently reclaimed home spaces, on par with home birth, home business, and home death.

⁸⁸ Here, by schooling I mean the praxis of schooling, writ large, that unschoolers find objectionable. This chapter reveals these by showing how unschoolers seek to enact alternatives to the routines, epistemologies, relations of power/ frameworks for interaction and conceptions of what constitutes acceptable activity that they object to not only in schools but in "mainstream culture," whose less favorable traits they often see as bound up in the mores of schooling.

they can take considerable focus or sometimes reveal multiple foci of attention. Sometimes children produce a mess in their wake; at other times they enhance the orderliness of their environments.

What of the adults in the unschooling households? Do they initiate this action? Do they allow their children's activity to order the environment, or do they "prepare" the environment, much like Montessori teachers "prepare" an environment and then become the "...*director* of the spontaneous work of the children"?⁸⁹ Do they recede to a supporting role? Or, do they, as unschooling guru John Holt suggested, "Have their own important work to do?" thus taking a peripheral but available role to children's activity? What does this all look and feel like? In this section, I consider these issues.

Unschooling parents often describe their children's activities as "work" to accord seriousness to children's activities. They oppose this term to what they perceive as the conventional usage of "play." Many unschoolers echo Maria Montessori's (1912) contention that "play is the work of childhood." Nevertheless, they often use the term "work" or the phrase "taking children's play seriously," to underscore for others, including their children, the seriousness and intrinsic value of children's activities. At the same time, unschoolers feel that children's work reflects tempos and patterns of activity often sensible only to the child

⁸⁹ From Montessori, (1912:370). In the Montessori method, a "prepared environment" refers to an "atmosphere created to enable the child to be free to learn through activity in a peaceful and *orderly* surroundings adapted to the child's size and interests" (Hainstock 1968: 114, emphasis added). While I encountered a rare few unschoolers who trace a direct lineage in their thinking between their unschooling philosophies and exposure or experience to Montessorian pedagogy (in fact, I encountered occasional talk among parents about "shaking off" a Montessori background in terms of "orderliness"), unschooling homes as educative environments share many traits of the underlying epistemology of a traditional Montessori environment. Chief among these are a sensibility of place designed to maximize children's engaging in as much of their own work as possible, with minimal adult direction. Whereas unschoolers rarely talk about "orderliness" as a feature of their homes, I contend that an underlying order pervades their home-based praxis. The main difference is that at home it is scaled perhaps to the relative number of people involved in a household instead of in a classroom. Further, just as Montessori teachers prepare their environments, unschooling parents fashion their homes as unschooling educative environments through often invisible activities that are much-obscured by unschoolers' emphasis on children's direction of their activities or "work."

her/himself. Unschoolers generally welcome this ambiguity and accommodate it in their homes.

To mothers like Jill Peters, the cadences of the unschooling lifestyle have a negotiated, or in Jill's terms, "open" character. To index how that "openness" can affect the parent's sense of planning, Jill describes her family's lifestyle as "spontaneous." She attributes much of that quality to what she describes as "making a life with children." For Jill, this phrase captures the feel of spontaneity of what Jill explains this condition as "being open to possibilities," that many unschoolers feel shapes the actions and cadences of their lives. It also suggests that unschoolers make their lives *with*, rather than around, in spite of, or largely segregated from, their children --another way that unschoolers distinguish themselves from mainstream families. In the two sections that follow, I consider first the parents' and then the unschooled child's perspective on these activities and attend to the ways in which unschoolers find these activities meaningful.

If You Give A Mom A Cookie: Managing Self-Direction Through "Neglectful"

Parenting

For unschooling mothers like Jill, the cadences of a lifestyle with children have a negotiated, or in Jill's terms, "open" character. To index how that "openness" can affect the parent's plans, Jill and her friends jokingly refer to the unplanned days that sometimes arise from an unschooling lifestyle as: "If you give a mom a Cookie." Jill here suggests that unschoolers' activities, particularly their activities in and around their homes, resemble those depicted in the popular children's books, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*, and *If You Give Moose a Muffin* written by Laura Numeroff.

The Numeroff stories depict unsupervised children's encounters with industrious animals, who take over their homes after the child makes a generous gesture, such as offering food. Each animal moves through the child's home with great energy in a cycle of activities that produce extraordinary results, such as a theatrical performance, a massive letter-writing campaign, and a well-decorated tree-house. The text in these tales focus primarily on the animals' activities, while the children play supporting characters who provision and patiently accompany the animals. The illustrations convey the animals' whimsy and adventure. Yet, they also depict a progressive depletion of energy in the good-natured children, who follow the animals around to fetch their supplies or clean up in their wake. The children always look fatigued by the story's end.

Although I was familiar with these books, I asked Jill to explain why she felt they captured her family's experiences as unschoolers. Jill equated her own experiences to those of the children in these stories and her own children's experiences as parallel to those of the animals in the stories. She drew on the activities of a morning from earlier in the week to illustrate what she meant:

So like, after breakfast, [three year-old] Nicollete dumps out a bunch of puzzles on the floor and then, after a while, [seven year-old] Owen doesn't want to do them anymore, so he'll get into something else and I'll come over and help Nicollete clean the puzzle pieces up and she'll go check out what he's doing and then before I know it, they're getting into an art project, so I'm taking out all this arts and crafts stuff, and then she spills water all over the place, so we get involved with that and with cleaning it up and then, it's already one o'clock.

Here Jill captures the feel of the children's movement through different activities and

explains how the morning “got away from” her family. Her description also characterizes how unschooling parents typically foreground children’s activities over and above adult work. For although Jill clearly situates herself within the action as someone who facilitates the activity by providing supplies and initiating clean up, she takes a child-centered perspective on what happens.

When I shared these observations with Jill, she drew an additional parallel between the themes in the *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* books and her life in an unschooling family. She focused on a trope of children’s empowerment that many unschoolers foreground as a basic feature of their lifestyles and educational practices:

Those storybooks play on [a] theme of making adults seem so vulnerable. We often forget our power around children. For them to see that vulnerability --to see the boy flopped in the arm chair looking exhausted by the story’s end-- makes them [kids] feel superior -if even for a moment- by poking fun at the adults. Kids don’t get much of that very often.

When Jill analyzes the story as an opportunity for children to vicariously experience empowerment over adults, she reflects a perspective, typical among unschoolers, that children in mainstream culture have few occasions to feel a sense of empowerment or agency over their activities. To counter this idea of how power relations work in the “mainstream” as they construct it, unschoolers seek to cultivate and support young people’s self-direction and minimize coercion in their relationships.

Jill’s illustration also serves as an entry point to consider where adults stand in the unschooling paradigm. I encountered countless situations in which unschoolers allowed their children to make choices over their activities, such as what clothing to wear, whether to play

a particular game, which book to read, how to spend an afternoon, etc. Yet, parents often noted that in these circumstances they had no real “stake” or “investment” in the outcome of their children’s choices. Unschoolers took care to distinguish their perspectives on children’s empowerment from the ways in which they felt others typically perceive unschoolers as “totally laissez-faire,” in the words of unschooling father of three, Bruce Maxwell. In fact, many unschoolers expressed the opinion that children should not “run the show.” Instead, most unschoolers sought to allow their children as much choice and control over their *own* lives as practicable without allowing them to control the lives of others in the family, including parents. Many unschoolers felt that “mainstream culture” makes few such allowances for children. Nevertheless, efforts to balance their children’s perceived needs for empowerment, what many unschoolers describe as the “freedom to do their thing,” and the needs of other family members proved challenging at times. As I show below, the ways that unschoolers navigated these challenges revealed some problematic consequences that an unschooling lifestyle poses for parent-child and gender dynamics.

For example, when I asked Jill about her own agenda for the morning, she explained that she accomplished a number of what she calls “B” tasks (such as phone calls, mailings, etc. that can withstand disruption) related to her three businesses (recall that she teaches childbirth classes, works as a doula [a birth labor assistant], and sells cloth-diapering products). Like many of the mothers in my study, Jill structures her work life with considerable flexibility so that she can supervise her children while her husband (a private building contractor) works outside their home.

Like other unschooling mothers in my study, Jill noted that she does not feel that she “follows [her] children around all day.” Like many other unschooling parents, she describes

her role as her children's educational "facilitator." In this role, she plays a peripheral part in her children's activities. "I'm nearby for when something comes up," such as questions, spills, requests for art supplies, or for help with puzzles. Jill lent a pedagogical explanation to this peripheral availability; she explained that it teaches her children the "give and take" of life, starting with family life:

When you [the child] have the freedom to do your thing most of the time, then some days are structured by mom's needs completely. We have to go to the bank, then two different grocery stores, then to the chiropractor, and then to Rite Aid. And they haven't done anything but follow me around all day. Now, that doesn't mean that there aren't 100 teachable moments during that time, which I may or may not have taken advantage of depending on how I'm feeling.

Here, Jill describes a morning of "following mom around" as an instance of ensuring that "everyone's needs getting met" as she, like many unschoolers, describes the cultivation of the habits of compromise. Thus, Jill feels little compunction when she imposes the needs of running the family, what she, notably, characterizes as *her* needs, upon how her children spend their time. In this sense, Jill sees unschooling as a give-and-take between children's and adult's agendas.

Yet, such efforts at mutuality and flexibility reveal, and are predicated upon, certain lifestyle entailments. Not all families have the flexibility for parents to accomplish their own work goals (or most of them) in proximity to their children; certainly, Jill's husband cannot do so, even with his relatively flexible work as a private contractor. Moreover, Jill's circuitous path --through two grocery stores, to both procure the particular types of "natural" foods that she prefers and to comparison shop, and to her routine visit to the

chiropractor -- indexes the types of alternative food and healthcare consumption as well as the habits of thriftiness common to unschoolers. These alternative practices take place at a nexus of lifestyle dispositions buttressed, typically by ample educational capital; and, if not ample economic capital, then by ample (maternal) time to engage in cost-cutting consumption, what many describe as “tight wadding.”⁹⁰

Furthermore, when Jill refers to the “hundreds of teachable moments” that arise out of her family’s lifestyle, she reveals how unschooling parents construct both unschooling pedagogy and their roles as facilitators of their children’s learning in opposition to mainstream schooling. When Jill uses the term “teachable moments,” she engages in a display of educational capital common among unschoolers: a facility and play with terms from educational theory. Phrases like “teachable moments” characterize what many unschoolers describe as “educationese” –terms that educators often use and unschoolers draw upon to flout some of these ideas. In this case, Jill displays that she understands that some teachers use the term to describe the concept that the mundane material of “real life” poses continual and valuable opportunities to teach children as they learn and develop. Teachers often encourage parents to “find” or “take advantage” of such moments.⁹¹ Unschoolers like Jill see this insight as obvious and as an essential part of their praxis.

Notably, Jill explains, in a mostly joking and self-effacing manner, that the condition of “taking advantage” of these moments depends on how she feels at any given moment.

⁹⁰ See Grigsby’s 2004 sociological analysis of “voluntary simplists,” who, like many unschoolers, engage in similar “tight wadding,” practices. Grigsby considers how “VS-ers” make sense of the trade off between money and time. She also foregrounds the central problematic of “voluntary” simplicity in a country of extraordinary and growing economic disparity, where such economic “choices” remain the in the purview of middle class affluence. I found this theme to run through the unschooling population as well. I consider other dimensions of unschoolers’ consumption and home-economic strategies in chapter six.

⁹¹ I am grateful to my colleague Michael Hesson for this insight and for sharing how his daughter’s nursery school teachers encourage parents, through newsletters and informal conferences, to take advantage of “teachable moments.”

Yet here, she, in fact, further aligns herself with unschooling pedagogical principles, which assert that children's meaning-making capacities have intrinsic value; they do not require adult involvement. Unschoolers like Jill typically rely upon children to *ask* for such assistance: "So I'm prepared to be asked a million questions a day." Thus, by underscoring how she "might not" take advantage of teachable moments, Jill reinforces the notion that often amounts to potentially damaging imposition of adults' attempts to teach or "interfere" with the meanings that children make of their worlds. In this way, unschoolers like Jill often jokingly describe themselves as "neglectful" parents. They use this term tongue in cheek, as though to take the perspective of those in the mainstream, whom they perceive as too invested in marking for their children the educational significance of their experiences. Such investments, many unschoolers contend, take the focus away from the child and her or his interests and turn normal activity into a "lesson." Thus, while unschoolers are *deeply* invested in their overall educational project, the details and attitudes that they bring to many of their practices tend to be far more hands-off than their mainstream counterparts, whom they perceive as hovering.

Thus, although Jill contends that whether or not she "takes advantage" of such moments depends upon how she might be "feeling at the time," like most unschoolers she sees this capricious approach to engaging her children's interests as a matter of principled pedagogy. For when Jill, like other unschoolers, chooses to "take advantage" of teachable moments, she might impart her enthusiasm or knowledge about a particular topic by "exposing" her children to it. Unschoolers often speak of "exposure" (as opposed to teaching) and contend that such exposure arises organically out of their daily experience and out of parents' interests or passions. At the same time, unschoolers like Jill often choose to

ignore such opportunities. They instead leave the meaning-making up to their children, or bring them up as matters of exposure rather than invest themselves in whether or not their children follow through with an interest. In this way, unschooling parents eschew what many describe as “other-directed” or “agenda-based” teaching. In other words, the unschooling premise that people will learn only what interests them provides unschoolers an opportunity to live in comfortable contradiction with the notion that parents take a capricious role as “teachers” in their overall role as facilitators of their children’s learning.

In this section, I drew upon the perspective of an unschooling parent, Jill Peters, to illustrate how unschooling parents describe their roles as facilitators of their children’s self-directed education. I showed how unschooling parents like Jill often foreground their children’s activities over their own. Yet they try to strike a balance between their children’s activities and the needs of the family unit, which they often conflate with their own needs. I also suggested that unschooling parents engage in what they describe as capricious investments in their children’s curiosities, which they believe arise out of daily life. I showed how in this supposed caprice, they often call upon their typically ample educational capital to flout what they construe as mainstream approaches to teaching and learning.

If parents see themselves as facilitators, how do their children experience this hands-off approach to living and learning? In the section that follows, I consider this dimension of unschooling life by taking a child-centric, typically unschooling, perspective on family activity in the unschooling home as I narrow my focus to the activities of one particular unschooled child.

If You Give A Kid Some Freedom: How Children Navigate Space and Time at Home.

The days that I spent with unschooling families accorded me a strong sense of parent's, particularly mothers', activities as the central activity in the household. In my adult-centered perspective, I often viewed children as though they entered and exited an adult scene in a revolving-door manner. I suspect that a parent-centric view accurately depicts how unschooling parents see themselves as "available" to children and typically minding their own business. Yet, such a perspective produces a sense of the home space as a context for domestic or work-related activities that *also allows* for children to participate in a direct, peripheral, or concurrent manner. It also likely misses a key view on the action. For, understandably, children rarely experience their activities as adults do. To get a better sense of how children negotiate space and time in an unschooling home, I occasionally turned my attention towards the activities and movements of a particular child.⁹²

When I watched (and sometimes participated in) unschooled children's activities, I got a strong sense of the unschooling household as a site in which multiple actors engaged in overlapping and occasionally inter-related activities. This multiplicity of activity explains the impression of "busyness" typical in unschoolers' homes. The following thirty-minute activity cycle, an excerpt of a half-morning visit in which I recorded the movements of then five year-old Amir Berger, illustrates the simultaneity of action within the home setting. It also illustrates many unschooling principles at work.

I specifically selected Amir's activity because it exemplifies an unschooling cultural logic. It also characterizes the types of contrasts that unschoolers make between what their children do and what they believe takes place in conventional classroom settings. Amir's case, in particular, illustrates how unschoolers offer a countercultural logic on what defines a

⁹² These increments ranged from twenty minutes to a full day, depending on the activities in the household and how a given child would respond to my presence and attention.

problem. For, like many other unschoolers, Amir's parents contend that if their son were in school, teachers and counselors would likely construe his "normal, healthy, boy behavior" as Attention Deficit Disorder. In this sense, unschoolers contend that the contexts of an unschooling environment preserve and help cultivate what is "normal" in children. They believe that in contrast, schools make "unnatural" demands of how children move through time and space and thus create problems. They re-frame what they feel the mainstream perceive as "problems"; rather than being stigmatized at school, Amir is accepted at home.

In an unschooling cultural context, parents view all of children's self-assigned activities as "work." When I shared this vignette with Amir Berger's parents, they characterized his work as he moved through space and time throughout his home as purposeful and logical. By and large, Amir's activities and his attention moved in relatively rapid succession. I had to attend carefully from the lens of an unschooling countercultural logic to find a pattern of purposefulness as he moved through his home. By happenstance, Amir's activity takes a cyclical cast because in the thirty minutes that I set aside to "take notes" on him, he happened to identify and resolve a particular problem; namely that dried rice needed sweeping. In addition, I selected this swath of activity because it can be read easily from an unschooling cultural logic, which views *all* of children's self-directed activity as valuable.

On that particular morning in late January, I brought several "rice shakers," plastic eggs filled with uncooked rice, to the Berger-Tobin home. My one year-old daughter, Ella, broke her shaker and dried rice spilled to the floor near the fireplace in the living room. The cycle of activity that I describe begins when Amir said "Woops, Baby Ella! I'll get that," and ended thirty minutes later when he swept up the rice with a dustpan and broom, taken from

the low hooks in the kitchen closet (installed by his father, Irving, for the exact purpose of enabling children to clean without asking for help). But before the spilled grains of rice made their way into a worm compost box in the kitchen,⁹³ Amir engaged in several self-assigned activities. During these activities, he moved across the entire downstairs of his home, (the rooms of which, connect in a circular fashion) and interacted with everyone in his environment:

Amir's route towards the dustpan began with a move from the fireplace into the entrance to the dining room, where he stopped for several minutes to watch his eight-year-old older brother, Uri, and his seven-year-old friend, Kyle, play cards on the dining room floor. He glanced towards the windowsill and then walked over to his amaryllis bulb, which stood in one of the three peanut butter jars (one for each child), that the family potted earlier that week. Pulling up a dining room chair to the window, he surveyed the bulb and touched the soil, and presumably concluded that it required water as he said quietly, "Aren't you thirsty today?" Amir then called Uri and their neighbor Kyle over to check out all the bulbs. Uri made his way over by stepping on each of the dining room chairs and Amir followed suit; he moved around the dining room table as he stepped atop each chair in the round. Kyle joined in and each boy, for a while, tried to outdo each other's fancy jumps from chair to chair. When Amir returned to his original spot in front of the windowsill, he seemed to return his attention to his "thirsty" bulb.

Amir stepped down from his chair and turned his body in the direction of the kitchen, directly behind him. He paused and watched Uri scrape some dried wax off of the windowsill. "Look, it's Chanukah in January!" Uri exclaimed. For the next two minutes, Amir joined Uri and Kyle in search for

⁹³ For about a year, the family had a "vermipost" composting system, in their kitchen. They had filled a steamer-trunk sized chest with shredded paper and several thousand worms, which they fed their organic trash. They first froze waste from produce in the freezer, to cut down on unpleasant smells and the system seemed to work well. According to Rachel, the worms efficiently produced "some of the richest compost I've ever seen." The compost box was gone when I'd returned a year later, as Rachel and Irving decided that "the worm experiment," as they termed it took up more kitchen and freezer space than it was worth; they instead reverted to composting in their back yard.

more bits of colored wax, which they piled next to the pots of amaryllis bulbs. When they ran out of wax, Amir turned his attention back towards the bulbs. He then headed towards the kitchen.

Amir retrieved a watering jug from a child-height shelf next to the kitchen sink, climbed the step-stool at the sink and filled the jug in short order. He stopped to look around the kitchen and signaled his activities to his mother, Rachel, by raising the water jug. Amir did not verbalize his plan, perhaps because he noticed that Rachel was on the phone. As a La Leche League leader, Rachel was counseling a new father over the phone about his wife's sore nipples. She cradled the phone between her shoulder and ear so that she could, without skipping a beat, scoop up legumes for a crock pot stew. The beans were scattered on a towel on the floor where she had sorted them (for inedible beans) in the company of toddler Tzvi. Tzvi squatted near the towel and played with the beans. Amir took in this scene for a moment. Then, watering jug in hand, he headed to the windowsill in the dining room. He placed the jug on the dining room table, pulled a chair up to the windowsill, moved the jug to the sill then climbed onto the chair before pouring water into each of the three jars that held the amaryllis bulbs.

Amir then returned to the kitchen, climbed the step stool in front of the sink and placed the jug, upside down, in the dish rack. This time, he looked around the kitchen, seemingly to find a snack. From across the room, he spotted a plate of oranges that Rachel had sliced and placed on the kitchen table. He crossed the room and helped himself to a slice. He then squatted on the floor next to Tzvi, who was using a ladle to pour kidney beans and garbanzos into a large, emptied yogurt container, one of several strewn on the floor, which the toddler presumably removed from the lowest drawer. Amir put down the half-peeled fruit to balance a funnel that Rachel had earlier provided Tzvi onto the mouth of an empty salad dressing cruet. When the metal funnel clanked the glass cruet, Tzvi looked up and said, "ding." Amir then replied, "ding" and offered his brother some of his fruit. Amir began to pour beans through the funnel. When a kidney bean got stuck in the mouth of the funnel, Amir got up in search of what turned out to be scrap paper. He

went into the bathroom (adjacent to the kitchen) for a moment and returned with a crumpled copy of the magazine *Natural Jewish Living*⁹⁴, “*Ima, can I have this?*” Rachel put up a hand to signal for her son to wait a moment. In response, Amir covered his mouth but also waved the magazine in the air. Seeming to realize that he needed a simple response, Rachel covered the phone’s mouthpiece, smiled at her son and nodded. Amir tore off a sheet of paper from the magazine, rolled it and put it in the place of the funnel on the mouth of the jar and then worked to dislodge the bean. He set back to work, taking turns with Tzvi.

When Rachel got off the phone, three minutes later, she thanked Amir for his patience as she finished filling the crock pot. Sucking on an orange slice, Amir continued to fill the jar. Within two minutes, Amir asked Rachel when he began to talk. They began a conversation about how his language developed and speculated about when and how Tzvi might begin to speak. When Rachel explained that Amir spoke in fits and starts, beginning with some of the baby sign language that Uri had learned as a baby, Amir began to ask more about Baby Sign Language. Rachel explained how they used sign language and gesticulated a number of signs to demonstrate. As they talked, she went into the adjacent den and scanned the bookshelf. Amir came to her side just as she found the dog-eared reference book and removed it from the shelf. He followed her as she brought the book back to the kitchen and pulled up a chair at the table as she perused the book. Amir took the book from her when Tzvi toddled up to breastfeed. Amir first stood in front of Rachel’s lap to page through the book. Rachel occasionally pointed out the signs that either he or Uri had used. Amir began to practice a few of the signs. After a few minutes, the telephone rang. Amir brought

⁹⁴ Magazines such as *Natural Jewish Living* typify the relatively small demographic set of Jewish unschoolers whom I encountered: families that identify strongly with both Jewish practice and with what many construct as “natural” living. Generally, Jewish day schools comprise the normative educational context for Jews as observant as the Berger-Tobins; also as divergently, unschoolers typically do not frame their lifestyles around religious praxis. Thus, families like the Berger-Tobins, who identify themselves strongly as Jewish unschoolers find themselves melding their alternative identities in a hybrid manner. My data sampling comprised a handful of such families on account of my routine contact with the Berger-Tobins; as such, a Jewish gestalt permeates many of my anecdotes. At less intimate levels of the unschooling movement, I also encountered other types of hybrids as specialty unschooling groups, namely Muslim and Christian unschooling groups, who specifically sought out fellow *unschoolers*, who shared their religious identities since more general homeschooling groups with such constituencies tended to be made up of school-at-home homeschoolers, with different philosophies about educational and lifestyle praxis.

Rachel the phone, then removed the book from her lap and carried it to the sofa in the adjacent den. He engaged me directly for the first time since I had offered him the egg shakers upon my arrival and called to me at my spot in the kitchen (where I had set up a perch since he arrived there) to invite me to sit with him on the sofa and go through some signs together.

For the next several minutes, Amir alternately sat and got up as we tried out different baby signs. Then he announced that he remembered a picture of himself showing the sign for “more” (closed fists moving towards each other in this sign system). He suddenly raced into the adjacent living room and climbed onto the sofa to grab the picture from the windowsill. He stared at the picture for a moment then replaced it and began to tell me about the other half-dozen pictures on display. When Uri, back on the floor playing a different card game with Kyle, overheard us, he quickly corrected Amir’s assertion of the location of a particular beach photo. As Amir handed me each of the photos in turn, both he and Uri provided me and Kyle with details about the various events depicted in the photos. When Amir returned the last photo to its place, he slid off the sofa. One of the pillows slid off with him and he took several turns of tossing it onto the floor and diving onto it, until the other boys eventually came in to join him. After a few minutes of jumping on the floor, Amir faced the fireplace and began to play with the grains of rice askew across the slate on the floor. For a while he placed a few handfuls of grains into a half of a plastic eggshell. He then looked at all the grains on the floor, got up and within thirty seconds retrieved the dustpan from the kitchen and swept up the remaining grains of rice.

Amir’s activities illustrate a characteristic, if short, instance of how unschooling families seek to produce a context, i.e. a spatial and temporal environment, that allows for the types of interactions (among people as well as between people and material), in which a child can largely direct his/her own activities and follow his/her interests as they arise. Although it took half an hour, Amir completed his (self-assigned) task of sweeping the dried

rice grains off the floor. On the way, he engaged in other ostensibly social and/or educational activities.

An unschooling cultural framing, such as his parents later provided, would characterize Amir's self-directed activities as "learning through living." Owing to her ample educational capital, Rachel was rather comfortable with the mores and language of conventional education. She felt that should could, "if pressed," translate Amir's activities into "educationese," a term many unschoolers use to describe the terms and concepts that they believe educators to use. At the same time, however, Rachel somewhat scorns these conventions and tends to refrain from listing the various "skills –school-style" that one could distill from her children's activities. Instead, she took an unschooling approach to describe Amir's activities: "He did what made sense to him at the time."

Yet, when I showed Rachel and her husband, Irving Tobin the vignette and asked them to explain what they found significant in their son's activities, they identified a number of "unschooling values" at play. These values include: completing the tasks of cleaning the rice and watering the bulbs demonstrate taking responsibility for one's space and for living things; spending time with siblings and friends at play shows caring for people; working with wax, making a game of the pillows and working with the beans involves creativity and different forms of dexterity; engaging in a number of care-giving interactions (between Amir and his younger brother as well as between Amir and the plants), helping Rachel with Tzvi and the phone; and, cultivating an interest in baby signs and finding resources (books and people) to cultivate that interest. They also noted that he helped himself to a snack, cleaned materials in his environment, and enlisted the adults and other children in the environment as resources.

Irving also pointed out that Amir's circuitous activity, filled as it was with "lots of noisy and jumpy movement," could also "be judged in other places, like schools, as distraction or hyperactivity." Irving's observation echoes a discourse, common among unschoolers (which dates back to John Holt's early writings and continues to circulate throughout the movement), that critiques mainstream schooling as a setting that does not tolerate and even stigmatizes "children who act like children." In the movement's countercultural vein of critiquing how the mainstream defines problems, unschoolers like Irving see conventional schooling as a context that stigmatizes, through "labeling," children who cannot conform their bodies, attention, or activities to the needs of the classroom.

Early in the movement, this critique focused on "learning disabilities." Contemporary unschoolers often level similar critiques at the phenomenon of "Attention Deficit Disorder." Unschoolers contend that "the system" of schools, parents, and, in many cases, medical professionals often engage in a range of practices that includes the use of prescription drugs, such as Ritalin, that seek to alter the individual, rather than the context, as the locus of intervention. Just as unschoolers see "Ferberizing" as an inhumane solution to problems *produced* by parents who wish for solitary sleep, which I discussed in chapter four, so too, many unschoolers contend that the demands of schools, which they perceive as not accommodating children's needs, produce such problems.⁹⁵ They thus criticize the ways that children bear the brunt of interventions of what many describe as "school-produced ailments."

Amir's case thus illustrates how unschoolers contrast their perspectives on children and their children's activities with what they see as the "school approach" to children and

⁹⁵ Unschoolers are not alone in this perspective. Critical education theorists also consider schools to be sites for cultural processes that attribute or "acquire" children to labels of dysfunction (c.f. McDermott 1993).

their activities. Unschoolers themselves spend much time talking about the way that an unschooling lifestyle supports children's "natural" behaviors. They assert that their own children's behaviors more-accurately characterize what children do when not restrained by what they consider to be the coercive expectations of classrooms. Furthermore, unschoolers like Rachel and Irving contend that normative classroom environments coerce children and render judgments that ultimately seek to redirect, modify, or otherwise shape children's behavior to the children's detriment. They perceive an unschooling lifestyle, which includes the home as an environment that accepts and welcomes children's "needs" and "idiosyncrasies" as a viable alternative to these perceived problems in conventional educational contexts.

In addition to describing Amir's behavior from both an unschooling perspective and the ways that they would expect "schools" to perceive his activity, Rachel noted the distinctly unschooled role that she takes as a parent facilitator in this context and in the broader context of her children's education:

What people don't understand about unschooling is that the parents aren't really directing their kid's activities for the most part, which I think is really different from what our school-at-home friends do in their houses.

Rachel distinguishes her role as an unschooling parent from other kinds of homeschooling parents as she similarly sets her parenting role apart from that of her traditional-school-utilizing neighbors. As she explains this distinction, she couples the integrative conditions of her unschooled family life with an implicit judgment about other parents:

Sometimes traditional-school-utilizing parents mention that they couldn't possibly spend all their time with their kids. I think that's a little sad, because I like my

children's company; I've raised them to be the kind of people that I like to have around. But I also think it's a little misguided. See, when you're always available to your kids, they're not always on you the way kids are when they don't spend much time around mom and dad. It's like they know you're there, so they just don't need to check in as often.

When Rachel makes these distinctions, she defines her role as an unschooled parent as the "facilitator" of her children's education. Rachel utilizes the term "availability [for her children]" to describe what I call parental peripherality the key concept that in their role as facilitators, parents take on a peripheral role to their children's activity. Unschoolers further contend that children engage in and learn through activity by "hanging out" peripherally or proximally to their parents' activities. In this way, actors within the context of an unschooling environment often engage in activity in proximity to each other, though they do not necessarily attend to the same things or participate in the same aspects of their activities. In Rachel's home, as well as in the homes of many other unschoolers, I noticed that parents often engaged in their own activities. Ever available to her children, Rachel explains that they don't often engage her as a playmate, but do frequently interrupt her as their needs (whether with questions or requests, for additional pair of hands, or for an audience) arise.

Rachel also believes that children have a need for proximity to their parents. And when that need is met, Rachel claims, "It's like they know you're there, so they just don't need to check in as often [and, therefore, children aren't as needy]." She implies that this ease results from how children behave once their "needs" are satisfied. Just as unschoolers in their early parenting experiences posit that when children's needs are satisfied they diminish over time, Rachel poses the idea that when parents meet their children's "needs"

for proximity to family, particularly to parents, their children are less likely to be perpetually “on” them or to seek out ways to satisfy the “need” for parental attention. Thus, for most unschooling parents, the role of facilitator requires not an expertise in content or the ability to cause children to conform to a particular notion of educational structure, but near-constant availability to address needs, respond to questions, solve practical problems, referee conflict, scope out resources, and other things of this nature.

When Rachel, like Jill Peters above and the other unschoolers I encountered, focuses on children’s needs, she downplays both her own needs and some of the more structured factors of her lifestyle. Through a confluence of her deliberate lifestyle “choices” as well as ample educational and economic capital, Rachel enjoys a position that accords her the opportunity to be “always available” to her children. These issues that appear on the surface to be about “availability” and “choice,” index some of the complexities in how an unschooling lifestyle fundamentally draw upon educational and economic capital as well as parental availability, which typically takes on a gendered cast.

In the previous two sections, I provided an unschooling countercultural perspective on how unschoolers construct their family dynamics as they “make a life with children.” I illustrated how unschooling parents make themselves peripherally available to meet their children’s “needs” in roles as “facilitators” of their children’s education. Jill Peters provided the perspective of an unschooling mother who, at times, focuses on her children’s activities and plays a supporting, peripheral role and, at other times, has her children follow her around in the pursuit of wider family needs, which she describes as her own needs. Like other unschoolers, she feels that the stuff of daily life provides what those in the mainstream see as “teachable moments.” Also, like other unschooling parents, Jill flouts the notion that

adults should render meaning to their children's activities. She instead embraces the identity of "negligent parent" in this regard she jokes that she only capriciously fills her role as facilitator and punctuates the role of facilitator as capricious.

In the example of how five year-old unschooler Amir Berger moved through his home, I illustrated the typical perspective that unschooling parents take on their children's activities. His parents offered a typically unschooled perspective on their son's activities. Owing to their own experiences and understanding of schools, they indicated that what they perceived as normal behavior in their son would in school be labeled as Attention Deficit Disorder. In typical unschooling fashion, they constructed their unschooling lifestyle as a way to re-frame what they see as a mainstream problem by focusing on what they perceive of as children's *needs*. In this case, the need to move around and the need for parental availability.

Yet, the unschooling home is not just a site of distinctive familial dynamics. Instead, unschoolers contend, it is a place in which unschooled children can "forage" for the educative stuff of daily life. In the sections that follow, I consider how unschoolers set up their homes as spaces that they believe enable their children to forage and develop competences.

III. Unschooled Tempos, Spaces, and Interactions To Cultivate Competent Young People.

Although no one ever defined the term for me, unschoolers often speak of "competence," the ability to do something well, as a principle or goal that shapes their practices.

Unschoolers typically seek to cultivate competence in tandem with autonomy, as they believe

that children are “natural learners” whose competence emerges best under conditions of “trust” and autonomy. Since many unschoolers equate children’s self-directed activities with “work,” they often go to great lengths to structure their home environments to accord children the freedom to forage for or “choose their own work.”

To accomplish these goals, unschooling parents try to allow their children to choose their work and provide them the time, space, and frameworks to evaluate or, in unschooling parlance, “appreciate” their work on their own terms.^{96,97} The pace of unschoolers’ lives, the spatial organization of their homes, and the ways that they interact with children all reflect how unschoolers seek to accord their children autonomy and encourage their competence. Like other unschooling characteristics, competence and perhaps even self-defined success do not merely emerge as “naturally” as many unschoolers contend. They are instead the accomplishments of both an unschooling lifestyle (itself an accomplishment of deliberate parental effort and habits) and concerted, yet often downplayed, efforts on the

⁹⁶ Note that while unschoolers hold this understanding of self-defined success as a philosophical standard, they also draw upon a sense of child development to attenuate what would otherwise produce children who might be completely out of synch with conventional standards altogether; an outcome unlikely to serve their offspring advantageously. Thus, most families expect that as their children move “out into the world” and begin to cultivate interests that others share, such as music, for example, they will begin to develop facility with the mores and conventions of an endeavor, such as music. As Nancy Wallace, author of *Child’s Work* and mother of two concert virtuosos explained

I think it’s important to make your own music when you’re young, but eventually it helps to learn musical notation, so that you can speak the language of music. If you want to seriously study with masters, you need to take up their standards.

In this sense, unschoolers incorporate their ideas about child development to attenuate the disadvantages that unbridled autonomy might bring their children; they encourage their offspring to cultivate their own interests. At the same time, parents draw upon their own facility with “the system” to ensure that their children can conform to the standards and norms of a given endeavor. As Elyse Locke explained, “We want our kids to be able to think outside the box, but to know what the box is and how to find it if they need it.”

⁹⁷ This set of values partially explains why many unschoolers philosophically as well as pedagogically oppose conventional forms of “standards” and standardized testing. As Seth Novak repeated often, “Tests tell you how well you test,” and often added, “...they’re usually rigged,” or, “...they indicate nothing about learning or who you are as a person,” etc. Many unschoolers in my study reflected these anti-testing sentiments, but nevertheless submitted to such testing in order to retain their rights to continue homeschooling. In addition, unschoolers, who often scoff at studies that claim that homeschoolers perform well on standardized tests (see Rudner (1999) for the most prominent example), sometimes invoke such claims when engaging with skeptics. This suggests that they strategically activate their facility and understanding of status and credentialing in the education system, writ large.

part of unschooling parents. In the following sections, I consider, in turn, the distinctive spatial and temporal dimensions of unschoolers' homes and how they see them as contexts in which their children can develop competencies.

Help Yourself: Producing Environments That Enable Competence

Unschoolers' homes have a distinct spatial sensibility from the homes of other families -- whether such families conventionally school or participate in school-at-home homeschooling. For example, school-at-home homeschoolers seem preoccupied with making school-like spaces out of their homes -- where to put desks, how to turn one's kitchen into a "classroom," where to place the American flag, the chalk board, and the paperwork.⁹⁸ Not so for unschoolers, who have markedly different pre-occupations. In interviews and in their movement's public sphere, unschoolers typically use words related to "nurture," "nourish," and "grow" to describe and write about their homes.⁹⁹ For example, unschooling-mother Elyse Locke once explained that her job as a parent was to "...creat[e] a nourishing home environment" that served as a space for her child to "grow into a competent, independent, adult." Additionally, unschoolers repeatedly invoked the notion of "child-friendliness" to distinguish how they account for what they perceive as children's embodied needs in their homes and lifestyles. Yet, such environments do not arise organically. They instead reflect considerable, often occluded, parental effort and a countercultural sensibility towards children's perceived needs and capabilities. Below, I consider how unschoolers produce and occupy their homes as formative sites of an

⁹⁸ Field notes from S.C.O.P.E conference session entitled "How to keep your little schoolhouse from taking over your kitchen." June 19, 1998.

⁹⁹ Texts that take up unschooling environments in this way include Shilcock and Bergson 1980; Colfax and Colfax 1982; Wallace 1990; Moran 1997; Lande 1996, 2000).

unschooling lifestyle.

Producing a “Child-Friendly” Home: Unschoolers’ Constructions of “Real” Safety

“Child proofing” or its various derivative forms (*child-proof/ed*, *to child proof*, etc.) take center stage among the environment-related concerns of parents and care-givers for babies, toddlers, and young children in the contemporary United States. This topic is so pervasive that a simple Google search yielded over 28,000 entries. A home that has been *child-proofed* has been organized or, in most instances, reorganized to ensure that mobile babies, toddlers, and small children cannot hurt themselves or their surroundings.¹⁰⁰ I draw here on an authoritative discourse, from the American College of Emergency Physicians (ECEP), to describe childproofing as “Taking some simple, preventive measures could help keep [children’s] unbridled curiosity in check and prevent many...injuries.”¹⁰¹ The ECEP offers seventeen basic childproofing guidelines that reflect entrenched beliefs about the “*hazards*” of children’s curiosity. As a course of action, childproofing often means that parents cover electrical outlets, install bumpers and barriers to fragile or hazard-promoting areas, and, in many instances, put up gates, playpens, or other furnishings to arrange typically separate, presumably safe, play areas for babies and children.

Unschoolers often critique childproofing on the grounds that it emerges from what they perceive as a distrustful attitude towards children. Irving Tobin, for example, suggested that “childproofing” reveals an attitude towards children, “that says that kids are clumsy at best and destructive to themselves and property in most cases.” Many parents contended that conventional messages about “safety,” such as telling children that they *will* get hurt, set

¹⁰⁰ In fact, child-proofing has become an area of specialization among home improvement contractors.

¹⁰¹ See <http://www.acep.org/webportal/PatientsConsumers/HealthSubjectsByTopic/peds/FeatureColumn>

up children's expectation for clumsiness and thus promote children's incompetence and recklessness. These parents approach matters of safety generally and safety within the home in particular with an alternative, "trust"-based sensibility.

Consequently, many unschoolers entrusted their children with what they believed those in the mainstream might construe as dangerous. For example, I encountered a number of parents who allowed their children the "freedom" and "trust" to walk around with marbles or small objects in their mouths. While some parents cited notions of child development that children should "explore" or "develop" mouth-control, many simply equated "real safety" to whether the child had retained her self-preservation instinct through attached, confidence-promoting parenting practices. This example typifies how unschoolers often take an embodied notion of safety. Many contend that children's safety arises from their competent mastery over their bodies rather than through alterations to their environments.

Owing to their general approach of "trusting" children, derived both ideologically and through their early parenting experiences, unschoolers equate safety to competence. As unschooling father and author Matt Hern writes:

Safety is always a dominating concern for everyone hanging out with kids, and the way to promote safety is to help our kids become stronger, not weaker (1996:59).

Here Hern relates the issue of safety to unschoolers' typical goal of cultivating competence in their children. Thus, in their primary orientation towards safety, unschoolers seek to promote what they perceive of as "stronger" or "competent" children who, in unschooling mother Vanessa Field's words, "trust their self-preservation instincts." Unschoolers' ideas about how children's safety connects to their "instincts" appear throughout the movement's

public-sphere discourse. Most unschoolers who talk about safety contend that children are, by nature, self-preserving rather than reckless. They further contend that detached parenting and distrustful attitudes undermine children's self-preservation instincts and promote recklessness.

Some unschoolers found this distinctively embodied and therefore somewhat countercultural connection between safety and attachment to create instances of challenge from others. I often overheard unschooling parents directing each other to articles in *Mothering Magazine*, books by attachment parenting guru William Sears MD, and, most notably, Jean Leidloff's *The Continuum Concept* to validate and explain their perspectives. I found this behavior consistent with unschoolers' habits of research and use of resources to develop, validate, and explain their countercultural practices. For example, I heard many unschoolers recount Leidloff's description of toddler-aged Yaquanna children playing near a waterfall. Leidloff claims that these children had a strong sense of just how near the edge they could go safely, and that the adults around them paid little heed as they 'trusted' that these children could mind their own safety. Leidloff attributes this sense of self-preservation to the Yaquanna's highly-attached child rearing practices.

By extension, unschoolers who found this perspective authoritative and who repeated this story (whether they had read Leidloff or not) identified with Leidloff's position and with the indigenous peoples that she drew upon to develop her argument. Thus, these parents implicitly identify themselves and their evolving relationships with their children as the basis of such trust and confidence and in a countercultural milieu.

However, I noticed that most unschoolers rid their environments of overt hazards related to poisonous substances, scalding from hot water, poking hazards, and what

unschooling mother Lisa Fitzgerald-Cola described as the “...common sense things.” When, like other unschooling parents, Lisa invokes “common sense,” she reveals that unschooling parents do not entirely divorce themselves from widely-held notions of safety in American society. They instead take an alternative logic to their home-based practices, which they describe as “child-friendly.”

Unschoolers’ conceptions of children as capable and competent, another iteration of the movement’s founding guru John Holt’s credo, “trust children,” pervades their notion of a “child-friendly” environment. Child-friendliness connotes an environment that presupposes a trust in children and welcomes and enables their competent foraging. Thus, for example, Wendi Brice and Scott Mackler, like many unschoolers, sought to encourage their young children’s safe use of household items such as knives, matches, stoves, electrical appliances, etc., rather than to prohibit their use. As Wendi explained:

Of course you have to know when your child is ready to handle something safely, but in our experience, that happened early on. We didn’t just say, “Here’s a knife, honey, go play,” but we showed them that knives were real tools that you used and respected. Same thing with matches, we showed our kids how to light a match rather than make them forbidden fruit, which never turns out well..

In this way, Wendi draws upon her knowledge of her own children, presumably well-developed through her early parenting experiences, as the basis of trust. Like other unschoolers, she also contends that respect for tools as well as respect for children (not making items verboten) promotes competence. To further illustrate their notion of child-friendliness, Scott added, “Our feeling was always that any cabinet within a kids’ reach *should* have things that a kid can use.” Like Wendi and Scott, many unschoolers believe that

children should have access to tools and instruction in their competent use as features of both safety and “child-friendliness.” Consequently, parents engineered their children’s access, sometimes limited, oftentimes not, to the materials that they need to do their “work.” In the following two examples, I show how parents do this in what they perceive as age-appropriate ways.

Karin Maxwell, who felt that “all children should know their way around a kitchen,” structured her time and environment to incorporate her children into family meal preparation on a daily and weekly basis. When her children were little, she would wear them in a sling or backpack as she cooked. She also kept kitchen items in a drawer for them to play with. Moreover, she gradually included her children in her and her husband Bruce’s weekly habits of meal planning. She also expected, over time, that her children would help prepare meals. To “front end” this work, Karin adjusted her kitchen to accommodate her children’s small size. Like other unschoolers, she provided step stools and had a caddy of kitchen tools, some child-sized and some adult-sized, where her children could easily reach them. In this way, her children were familiarized with these items and habits early on and she included them in some aspects of meal preparation.

Thus, one morning, I joined Karin and her children as they prepared dinner as part of their daily routine. While Karin answered the phone and started laundry, eight-and-a-half-year-old Zoey flipped on the classical music station and reminded three-and-a-half-year-old Zack that they were to make chicken stir-fry. Karin had cleaned the chicken at breakfast and Zoey would make the marinade. Zack prepared the rice and helped Zoey grate carrots and chop celery, peppers, cabbage, and broccoli. To stay out of the way and continually observe, I bagged these items and placed them in the Maxwell’s well-organized refrigerator. Karin

mentioned nothing about these activities and took her peripheral role in them as a matter of course.

However, her distinctly unschooling perspective on competence and safety stood out during a visit with what Karin described as her “mainstream family members.” Her cousin, Howard, his wife, Lisa, and their four-year-old son, Harrison, came over to lunch one Saturday. When a knife fell on the floor, Harrison brought it to Howard. Howard praised his son and proudly explained to us that “Harrison knows to bring us knives and he does it every time.” Karin smiled coolly, shrugged, and then responded with, “Hmmm. Zack never brings us knives, but he’s pretty handy with them.” Karin seemed unconcerned that her family rolled their eyes and seemed to construe as her attitude as smug. This interaction underscores the chasm between how unschoolers and their “mainstream” counterparts address children’s safety and competence. It also reflected how, as unschoolers develop self-assuredness with respect to their children’s behaviors, they set themselves as alternative, sometimes in ways that others perceive as arrogant.

Unschoolers also found other ways to include their children in their “work” and hobbies that taught competences while setting limits that promoted safety and what they construe as respect. For example, Bob Jenkins welcomed his nine- and six-year-old daughters, Ariel and Jessica, into his basement “shop” in fairly obvious ways. Bob presupposed that safety and competence arose from how he showed his children to “get around the shop.” He both instructed his children in the safe use of tools and found what he felt were developmentally-appropriate accommodations. He installed a low workbench and found child-sized but “real” hammers, saws, eye-shields, brooms, and dustpans for his children.

Bob also drew labels above each item and outlines on the walls where they hung so that his daughters could find and return items unassisted. When I asked about the labels and child-sized clean up tools, Bob explained that they were his “little way” to:

help the girls work independently so that they don’t come to me every time they need something or need to clean up. I want them to create, but you have to have some respect, you know? If not, they would interrupt *my* work...theirs too, in the long run, and would probably make me want to push them out of the shop. Then the whole experience would frustrate us all. I guess that’s my way of letting them in to my hobby, you know, teaching them how to tinker and build, and keeping things, you know, calm.

Like Bob, many unschoolers found “little ways” to engineer their environments to promote safety, access, and care of the environment. In these ways, they provided a structure that they believed promoted their children’s exploration and also accommodated their own needs to accomplish adult work. Thus, when many unschoolers claim that they “like their children’s company” and indicate that those in the mainstream do not, they downplay the efforts that they make to include their children in their work in a manner that honors their own limits and needs as adults.

Bob and the girls would spend hours at a time at work on separate or collaborative projects. When I visited in the early spring of 2001, I found Jessica and Ariel at work on two projects. In the first, a small side-table for the patio, they took turns using the jigsaw. Ariel had decided to build cup-holders into the table. “Coasters always get lost,” she explained to me. “That’s because you use them as Frisbees!” Jessica joked from her bench a few feet away. She and Ariel also continued to work on a small fleet of miniature water-craft for

much of the week, as evidenced by the several model-sized boats on the shelves next to Jessica's workbench. That morning, Jessica began work on the first of several rafts. She beckoned me over after turning off the drill. She lifted her safety goggles to her forehead and gestured to the pile of carefully sanded and drilled out miniature planks, "I'm trying to decide if I should make more planks or start connecting them," she explained. "Dad wants us out of here soon because he has an appointment and I really want to test it out, but it's a little small."

Bob encouraged the girls to use the shop as much and as independently as they wished, but he nevertheless circumscribed its use with "safety" rules. For example, he locked the door in his absence. When I asked Bob if locking the shop contradicted his general ethos of trusting his children, he shrugged and explained, "That's a contradiction I can live with; I *can't* live with the consequences of an unsupervised mishap, especially if Bobbie (aged 3) wanders in here by himself." Most unschoolers who I encountered indicated a similar ease with the lived contradictions that come with attenuating various unschooling principles and practices with notions of age-appropriate behaviors, culled from their experiences with their children. In these ways, Bob, like other unschoolers, provided his children an early and "safe" introduction to tools that help his children fashion their worlds.

Unschoolers also perceive environments that encourage inclusion and exploration as child-friendly and competence-promoting. To this end, many unschoolers choose furnishings and decorations that they believe minimize the kind of friction that they feel arises when children's activities put furnishings at risk for deterioration. Unschooling mother, Vanessa Fields described how she minimized parent-child friction and promoted

competence in terms of “yes” and “no” environments:

My grandmother’s house was full of fragile, expensive crystals and figurines. From a young age, she would take me around and go near each object saying loudly “No! No! No! No! No touch! Fragile.” And I got the message loud and clear that her stuff was very important to her and maybe that I was less so. I also remember breaking things there on occasion, which I guess confirmed her idea that kids were klutzy, but I wonder if it wasn’t ‘cuz of her limits.

Like many unschoolers, Vanessa believes that these type of “no” experiences breed resentment and, to some degree, incompetence or “klutziness.” Like other unschoolers, she sees the home that she creates with her husband, Mitchell, as a “yes” environment that promotes competence:

We’re more into people than things here, and I want [our children] to get that. We have tried to make our home more about: “Yes. Go check it out. You belong here.”

When they became parents, Vanessa and Mitchell put their fragile items in storage and found sturdy furnishings and rugs that would withstand wear and tear.

Thus, for several weeks during the coldest part of the winter, I would find different configurations of masking tape on the Fields’ living room carpet. Nine-year-old David, eight year-old Jason, four year-old Anna, and their friends rolled out the tape for increasingly elaborate “walking mazes” and obstacle courses; the kids would set up mazes on the floor and use mirrors tilted downward above their heads as guides. Unschoolers like Vanessa and Mitchell construct these practices as part of a sensibility of “welcome” in their homes, and, in a carry-over from their attachment parenting practices that I discussed in the previous chapter, they distinguish their homes as “people-oriented” as opposed to “object oriented”

places.

For many unschoolers, child-friendliness includes efforts to accommodate children's perceived needs for physicality, whether indoors or out. So while many unschoolers spend a great deal of time outdoors, parents also found ways to accommodate what they perceive as children's need for large, sometimes loud, movements. They do so in terms of spatial organization and through their attitudes towards children's activities. For example, Jill and Brian Peters organized their relatively small, one-room dining and living area to allow their seven-year-old son, Owen, and three-year-old daughter, Nicolette, "plenty of running room." They often push the major furnishings to the perimeters of the long room. Jill also explained that:

kids can be --sometimes *need* to be—pretty loud. If it gets too loud for us [she and her husband] we just go upstairs and let them do their noisy thing. They know that the whole house isn't for that [type of activity], of course, but they need to have some place where they can just roll around and make a lot of noise. I guess that noise is just *under-appreciated* in some places.

Like other unschoolers who I encountered, Jill contends that when they accommodate their children's perceived needs (for noise, for gross motor movements, etc.), their families feel peace and cooperation. To underscore this point, Jill added, "Who wants to put up with the consequences of all that energy having no place to go?"

Jill's position harkens to principles of attachment parenting that "needs that are met go away" and further, that unmet needs produce challenges such as children whose energies might find inappropriate outlets and thus create problems such as strife, inability to concentrate, clumsiness, etc. Many unschoolers familiar with conventional schools

acknowledged that schools typically seek to accommodate children's needs for energetic activity through recess, playground time, and physical education. Yet, they often critiqued these efforts on the grounds that they are scheduled and therefore can not accommodate the idiosyncrasies of children's energetic needs. Eve Small articulated this perspective when she explained:

It's hard to predict when a child is going to need to get up and jump around.

Sometimes the urge to jump up and run around happens in this fleeting moment, like between some other activities...It's just part of childhood and it's nice to not have to make a big deal out of it.

Like other unschoolers, Eve takes marked measures to accommodate these perceived needs and enjoys the space to do so.

For example, hers was among the four of the eighteen unschooling families with whom I spent extended time that had, at some point, hung swings *inside* their homes. The Mackler-Brice family also did this. For several years they even eliminated a table from the dining area of their relatively small home. They instead ate around the coffee table in the adjoining living area to accommodate swings. Similarly, Eve Small set up swings, rope-ladders, and a trapeze in her basement. She explained that:

If [five-year-old] Madeline is feeling very active, we can hang them up inside of thirty seconds; they make a nice physical challenge in the wintertime if the weather is lousy.

While not all unschoolers modify their homes in these specific ways, their furnishings generally reflect the pervasive idea among unschoolers that an appropriate environment takes into account children's needs, which includes the need to move around and the freedom to do so *whenever* the need arises.

Also, unschoolers' spatial and, as I consider below, temporal practices reflect an underlying premise that taking children's perceived needs into account *prevents* a range of undesirable behaviors and thus contributes to overall familial harmony. Now that I have considered the spatial-behavioral dimensions of how unschoolers describe and seek to fashion their homes as child-friendly spaces that support children's competent exploration, I turn my analysis to how unschoolers' temporalities reflect a similar countercultural sensibility.

The Gift of Time

I encountered a number of unschoolers who contend that their lifestyle provides their children the "gift of time." When I asked various informants what they meant by this "gift" their responses included:

Time to think; time to play; time to stare up at the clouds; time to learn and reflect; time to experience and *really* understand the cycles of nature; time to see a project through; time to experience genuine boredom; time to make mistakes and learn from them; time to learn how to cooperate; time to get to know themselves their families and communities *really* well; time to live in their own rhythms and time to become competent.

These "gifts" of the cadences of an unschooled lifestyle also express what unschoolers believe it means to be human, that is, what they value for their children. Moreover, unschoolers also contrasted the cadences of their lifestyles to what they perceived as the cadences of a "schooled" or mainstream lifestyle.

These orientations towards time also presuppose a value for and a condition of control over one's time. Many unschoolers chalk up control over one's time in terms of

“choice” or trade-offs. Yet, unschoolers’ perception on time reveals a privileged disposition on control over one’s time. As critical theorists Pierre Bourdieu (1991) and Adrie Kusserow (2004) suggest, these privileged dispositions typically arise from ample economic and educational capital, or as some of the examples below suggest, social capital. These privileges make these “trade-offs” or choices both possible and sensible for unschoolers.

Whose Time? Competing Perspectives On The “Uses” And Structures Of Time

The notions of “structure” and “routine” dominate childrearing and educational discourses. First, they implicate a notion of agency: who directs a series of activities across time and how do they make sense of their role(s). Additionally, structure evokes questions of “focus” or attention: what is assumed about a child’s engagement with a particular activity over time. Notably, the educational theorists that consider class, lifestyle, and educational advantage typically under-theorize or gloss some of the issues involved in the “structuring” of time (c.f. Lareau (2000); Varenne and McDermott (1999)). Further, those that consider temporalities typically ignore social structure (c.f. Elkind 1981).¹⁰² No strangers to conventional education or educational concepts, unschoolers frequently critique how schools and those in the “mainstream” structure time. In their critiques and practices of temporal “structure,” unschoolers reveal the relationship between their alternative lifestyles, their educational practices, and their privileged perspectives.

For example, unschoolers generally describe their time and their children’s education as “unstructured” or, in Scott Mackler’s words, “laid back.” They contrast this with how they construct mainstream Americans’ orientations towards time. Scott once illustrated this

¹⁰² I am indebted to Kathleen Hall for pointing out these gaps in the educational literature.

contrast by distinguishing between his family's temporal sensibilities and those of his "very mainstream" neighbors:

They talk about time like it's this scarce commodity that they have to manage or else it gets wasted, you know? Like they *freak out* if their kids spend too much time playing out back instead of doing their homework [pauses and gestures towards his next door neighbor's house]. Just yesterday afternoon, Milt [the father] came down to the creek [which runs behind both homes] and yelled at Mike, the nine-year-old, for wasting his time catching frogs with Chloe [Scott's six-year-old daughter] and Jack [Scott's four-year-old nephew]. Milt, actually called Mike in off the rocks to go inside and do his science lesson! Seriously, he grumbled the whole way inside about "wasting time" and such... [pauses and shrugs]. Personally, I don't see how hanging out in the creek and learning about frogs is *wasting* time....When you're really into your schedule, you get strong ideas of what kids need to do at a particular moment, so there's a tendency to write off much of what kids do outside of those priorities. But really, what's wasted time? I think fighting your kids is wasted time and that those kids are *seriously* over-scheduled.

Like many unschoolers, Scott contrasts his "mainstream" neighbor's approach to time, and, behind that, his neighbor's priorities, with his own orientation to towards time, scheduling, and priorities. First, Scott's claim that he "fails to see" how a child's activities might be characterized as a "waste of time" by an adult typifies an unschooling sensibility that tries to accord parity to children's agendas and adult-agendas. Like other unschoolers, Scott tends to valorize children as the primary directors of their own time. Thus, when Scott rejects his neighbor, Milt's, perspective, he reflects how unschoolers typically find it inappropriate and

unfair for parents and others to diminish as “wasteful” of time what children find compelling. Scott further delimits this position when he brings up what he perceives as an irony: the parent calls the child in to do his science homework, when catching frogs and learning about a stream’s eco-system are themselves scientific activities. As Scott sees it, the boy is unfairly sent to a task not of his choosing that reflects the agendas of the school board, the curriculum, his teachers, and, finally, his parents.

Here, Scott articulates one of the dominant tropes that pervade the unschooling movement’s public sphere and which levels a critique of mainstream parenting and educative practices: that the mainstream typically shows children that what interests them is a “waste” of time and that parents and schools can legitimately usher them around to focus on the parent’s or the school’s agenda.¹⁰³ Unschoolers like Scott see this as a significant loss: one of a childhood spent with countless such instances that culminate in the clear message one has little autonomy over one’s time and that one’s interests matter little.

In similar contexts, Scott exemplified unschoolers as he voiced critiques of mainstream education and culture. He suggested that the cumulative effect of instances in which schooled children like Mike were hurried away from their interests created multiple “losses.” Beyond the possible loss for Mike’s potential interest in frogs and what is called “science,” Scott felt that experiences like these impinge upon a child’s sense of self as having valuable curiosities and ownership over his or her time. Further, he contends that such encounters compromise relationships, such as with parents, teachers, and others in positions of authority, when they impede a child’s ability to structure her/his own time. In addition, unschoolers like Scott feel that such encounters compromise potential innovation because

¹⁰³ See, for example, widely circulated texts such as John Taylor Gatto’s essay, “The 7- lesson School teacher,” and the essays in Grace Llewellyn’s *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*, especially, “Ascent From a Nightmare.”

children become alienated from their (self-assigned) work. Thus, for unschoolers like Scott, these are the pedagogic, philosophical, interpersonal, and social stakes at play when they accord their own children the “gift” of self-directed time.

In addition, many unschoolers see their mainstream counterparts as, in Scott’s terms, “*seriously* over-scheduled.” They feel that highly-scheduled lives of mainstreamers pose a two-fold problem. First, they contend that busy schedules erode familial relationships. In addition, many unschoolers posit that over-scheduled children have scant occasions to learn to occupy themselves and discover *for themselves* their own interests. Unschoolers assert that the pace of their own lives markedly opposes what they perceive as the hectic pace of their mainstream counterparts. However, unschoolers are not as immune to these “mainstream” time “traps,” as some call them. As I consider in greater detail in chapter seven, many unschooling families, particularly those with older children, spend considerable amounts of time engaged in scheduled activities throughout their communities.

Moreover, unschooled children’s time is perhaps not as unstructured as their parents might suggest. First, while unschoolers treat as valuable a significantly-wide array of activities, they nevertheless have limits, which vary from family to family, on what constitutes a valuable use of time. Unschoolers, for example, generally consider television viewing as a waste of time. Thus, when Jill Peters “puts her children in front of the TV” in a babysitting pinch, she always does so with a self-effacing explanation, which indexes the normativity among unschoolers that certain forms of media consumption and uses of time require explanation. In essence, unschooled children’s time is not so much unstructured as it is loosely structured around a markedly different logic from their mainstream neighbors. Unschooling logic differs from mainstream logic in the amounts of and rhythms in time that

lead to specific constructions of an educated person; in this case, the specific constructions deal with class and/or countercultural constructions (c.f. Levinson et al 1996).

Unschoolers also eschew “excessive” and adult-driven scheduling because they perceive that it accords greater value to certain types of (adult-driven) activities. Thus, like other unschoolers, Scott contends that when mainstream people push their particular agendas through tight schedules, they undermine the intrinsic value of children’s activities. Like other unschoolers, he sees this as a loss for the potential learning opportunities that he believes arise when children develop the habits of occupying their own time. Scott once conveyed this point with an anecdote:

Just the other day, we were fixing the fence and I sent them [the kids] over to the woodpile for some planks. It took them a while to get back, so I went over there to see what was going on. Turns out, they were checking out what had been living underneath the wet wood this winter. Jack was just fascinated with the slugs and the earthworms. He spent the whole day asking all kinds of questions about them and running back to see what they were up while we worked on the fence. Then Chloe and Samantha offered to help him make a little terrarium thingy, so they got a little sidetracked with it. You know, they used empty jars and searched for things to put into it. So, we made a little less progress on the fence; I told them that we’ll have to work on it tomorrow and maybe they’ll have to miss a visit to the zoo with their other cousins. They said that they didn’t mind missing the zoo.

Scott told this anecdote to highlight how child-centered activities emerge in tandem with flexible agendas. Yet, I wondered how he felt about how the children changed plans, both on him (in partially-abandoning the fence) and on their cousins. To what extend did child-

centered activity mean not taking others' needs into account? In response, Scott invoked the notion of "stake-holding," which unschoolers often circulate amongst themselves. Scott often referred to his family's version of child-directed learning as treating the child as the primary "stakeholder" in her/his activity, a construct that he felt gives room for the entire family's agendas to come into play.

To clarify how stake-holding worked and to reiterate his position that children "can't run the entire show in a functional family," Scott explained both how he would make his children accountable for their choices and why he supported their decision to stay home the following day:

I'm gonna hold them to [their commitment to the next zoo trip], too, since it's about their word and their choices; their cousins are also pretty flexible and so I think the kids know that it's okay to change [plans] that way. They might not [change plans] with other kids. The point is, I can't call staying home instead of going to the zoo a waste of time either. ... Just like I don't mind so much about the fence because I know that it will get done, I don't have a real *investment* in whether they go to the zoo or spend more time learning about slugs; that's their business. Seriously, you might call that a waste, but I've seen kids dragged along at the zoo so as to not waste the trip, you know, "You're here to learn about animals, damn it! Quit staring at the gum wrappers!" that kind of thing.¹⁰⁴ So, I guess that [what one considers a waste of time] is really about priorities.

¹⁰⁴ Scott's reference to "that sort of thing" indexes both a belief that such encounters take place all the time and an anecdote from a central text of the unschooling movement, Nancy Wallace's *Child's Work: Taking Children's Choices Seriously* (1990). Scott suggested that I read this book and I suspect that his anecdote served as a way to involve me in the unschooling scene and thus mark me as someone with insider knowledge. In Wallace's introduction, she describes parents at the zoo who "trotted along from animal cage to animal cage, dragging their children with them, unaware that to their children each moment encompassed a year of discoveries."

Here Scott, contends that that “wasted time” is an artifact or a pre-occupation of people who are “really into their schedules.” This contention reflects unschoolers’ sensibilities about the interconnections between time, lifestyle, and a pedagogy that gives primacy to children’s curiosities. Both of Scott’s stories reflect unschoolers’ abiding concern over how children conduct their time. They believe that the things that children do and to which children attend are intrinsically important and not to be diverted without consequences such as resentment, diminished curiosity, or missed opportunities to learn and cultivate a passion or interest.

Later that afternoon, as we stood at the end of the Mackler-Brice’s mud-caked driveway, I offered Scott a somewhat critical perspective on his anecdotes. Scott seemed to relish my questions and the insights I offered during what became our parting ritual at the end of my days with his family. As we walked to my car while he retrieved his mail from the postbox at the end of the driveway, I half-jokingly suggested that it was a “lucky thing” for his family that they didn’t need the fence up quickly or that visits to the zoo with cousins were commonplace enough that his children’s absence would not be a major disappointment for the others. Scott nodded but also shrugged as he responded:

Wallace describes her sense of outrage at the parent’s “lack of sensitivity to their children’s magnified sense of time.” From her perspective, these and all children “...moved along within no discernable time-frame, guided only by their curiosity and hunger for discovery.” Wallace reflects on what she sees as the inevitable (at least for those families who do not unschool or otherwise take their children’s work seriously):

Part of the fascination for me then-- the outrage-- was knowing that eventually these children would tire of their battle [with their parents to experience the zoo on their own terms]. They would grow taller and learn to stare into the animal cages the way they were supposed to. The thought that they would learn to laugh at what was expected, at the expense of going blind to the peeling paint and the trampled popcorn, horrified me. Already I realized the value, the beauty, the importance of child’s work, and the tragedy of its loss (1990:3-4).

I quote Wallace here at length because I suspect that Scott offered his “zoo” reference--a real example from his children’s lives, which had taken place earlier that week--not only to make the point as he offered it in the interview, but also as a reference to a shared understanding among unschoolers -- and as a bid to see if the anthropologist in his living room understood what he saw as the gravitas of these different perspectives on the structuring of children’s time and work.

Well, we are lucky, you now, *we have a lot of control* over how we spend our time, so that I can say “the heck with the fence, we’ll fix it tomorrow, or if some [private contracting] job comes up [that would take Scott away from home for a while], later in the week” (Emphasis mine).

Considerably aware and sympathetic to many issues of class inequalities,¹⁰⁵ Scott nevertheless reiterated his position that what I described as a “lucky thing” or set of circumstances was also a “choice.”

Scott’s response echoed a position taken by many unschoolers, who, like him and his wife, enjoyed ample educational capital but a far-smaller income than their neighbors. Scott explained, “How we spend our time is about the only thing we can control...it’s about priorities.” A few supermarket circulars flew out of his hand as he gestured towards his house. The split-level home, which Scott and Wendi purchased long before their children were born, had a very “lived in” visage: its relatively dilapidated exterior and crumbling driveway with two aging cars (one with black “cow spots” to cover up rust marks) stood out in a neighborhood of tidy suburban homes --often serviced by professional painters, gardeners, and repair people-- as having a number of ongoing repair projects. Scott laughed

¹⁰⁵ Scott and his wife, Wendi Brice, often talked about issues of social inequality generally and also in connection with their decision to homeschool. Wendi would often talk about the inequities of funding in education. She once explained that while she couldn’t control the fact that they lived in a “privileged district” [one with significantly higher per capita funding than in the surrounding urban and rural districts], she could control how her family conducted itself in light of that unfairness. She and Scott often explained that part of their purpose in homeschooling was to make time in their lives for “significant community service.” They focused much of their activism around poverty issues. They both served on the board of a local fair housing organization and their family volunteered regularly with Habitat for Humanity and weekly at a shelter for homeless women and children.

Notably, while many unschoolers in my study talked about how unschooling provided them greater time and flexibility to volunteer and most of them did have a few volunteer projects in which their families engaged, volunteerism, like diversity in unschooling, seemed to be talked about a great deal relative to the actual conditions of unschoolers’ lives. For example, many unschoolers in Scott and Wendi’s local community would mention the Mackler-Brice’s rather than their own volunteer activities.

as he bent to retrieve the muddied fliers before the wind blew them into the side of the partially-repaired fence:

I guess you can tell that by looking around [laughs]. As you can see, it's a nice block, but we're not the richest people on it --far from it. My kids wore hand-me-downs and we mademost of their toys. And we get that not everyone can make the same choices that we have. I realize that some people don't even have a house or beat-up cars like ours. I really get that, we see it every week when we volunteer [for Meals on Wheels and Habitat for Humanity and in a shelter for battered women and children], and I think you can help *that* set of problems, you know, people with fewer choices, from the outside. It's just that around *here*? This is about having two Volvos, I think. And you know, there comes a point where people have to wake up and ask: how many hours do you really have with your kids? How many days do they have where they're gonna want to look at slugs all day? You know? How do you want that time to go by?

I shrugged in return and thanked Scott for his insights as I got into my car. Another day of living on unschooling time made this "gift of time" both more and less sensible. For on the one hand, I found that Scott's critique of his mainstream, middle-class neighbors based on notions of "time" and "priorities" resonates with many unschooling sensibilities and with those concerned about the potential hazards of the hurried pace of life that many Americans experience (Elkind 2001). Like other unschoolers, Scott leveled his critiques at his middle-class "neighbors" as stand-ins for the "mainstream." On the other hand, like a few, yet certainly not all, of the unschoolers I encountered, Scott tempered some of his comments about "choices" with an acknowledgment that the class inequalities in America circumscribe

the available choices of many less-advantaged families. This made Scott's critique of the mainstream somewhat less coherent in terms of a class-based critique.

To be sure, many unschoolers, like other middle-class Americans, reflected an inability to "think straight about class," as sociologist Benjamin Demott (1990) suggested. Instead, they fall back on the logic of individual choice that suggests a blind spot to the gravitas of social and economic inequality (c.f. Kusserow). For example, one of my more ironic encounters with unschoolers' rhetoric about "people making choices" occurred in the living room of the well-appointed home belonging to Diane Mirbello, a successful, divorced chiropractor who "single-handedly" unschooled her nine year-old daughter with the help of a cadre of international au pairs and tutors. Diane expressed her impatience with "people who can't see past their circumstances." This impatience reflects a privileged perspective on "time," "lifestyle," and "choices" that often arises from the advantages of educational and social capital that many unschoolers enjoy.

In spite of and including these contradictions, unschoolers also find pedagogic reasons to bristle against what they see as the hurried lifestyles of their mainstream counterparts. These have much to do with their beliefs about child development, which I consider in the following section.

"Good and Ready" for Competence: The Rhythms of Idiosyncratic Development

The principle of idiosyncratic development that pervades unschoolers' early childrearing practices also infuses their lifestyles and educational practices. Unschooling mother Vanessa Fields summarized this principle when she explained, "Under *normal* conditions, living things grow according to their own rhythms when they are good and ready." This ethos inflects

the tempos of unschoolers' lives. Just as unschoolers' parenting practices exemplify a belief in idiosyncratic development in early childhood of capabilities such as walking, talking, weaning, etc., their practices surrounding how children develop and learn other skills and dispositions reflect a similar belief in idiosyncratic development. Additional themes significant to unschoolers emerge when we consider the rhythms of unschooling in other temporally-guided terms. How, then, do unschoolers conceptualize and live out their ideas about idiosyncratic development and their notions of "good and ready?" Below, I address these questions as I consider the unschooling cadences of daily life and the more long-term dimensions of life through projects.

Competence on "One's Own" Clock and Calendar

Like many other children her age, four-year-old Madeline Small has a number of mini-routines throughout her day. Her parents contend that as an unschooler, Madeline's routines are less connected to a clock or calendar than those of most of her age-mates. "Not a morning person" by her mother Eve's account, on most days Madeline wakes up between eight and nine. As she has no nursery school to hurry to, she sometimes plays a while in her room before she dresses or comes downstairs. Like many unschoolers I encountered, Madeline sometimes spends a good part of her morning in pajamas.¹⁰⁶ Also like many unschooled children, Madeline selects her own clothing and dresses herself.¹⁰⁷ She brushes

¹⁰⁶ Many unschoolers see this as a form of pride. For example, one unschooling father I encountered explained that his nine-year-old daughter responded to a schooled neighbor's enthusiastic description of her school's "pajama day" by proclaiming, "Every day is pajama day in my house!"

¹⁰⁷ Children's selecting their own clothing emerged as a significant praxis for unschooling parents. Parents saw this basic issue of comportment linked to children's sense of "empowerment," one of many small practices that unschoolers feel habituates children to make as many choices as they can about matters that might be important to them. I recall Scott Mackler describing this sensibility in terms of "parental ego:" "I try to take my ego out of this, how he [his oldest child] wishes to dress himself has no reflection on me except that it might show that I'm the kind of parent who lets his kid dress himself." He quickly added, "Of course, I might have an investment in how he dresses to a funeral, so it's not always a free-for-all."

and styles her own hair and often braids it --an activity that took a few weeks to master and which Eve claims would not have happened if their family had a daily rush in the morning.

"I know my old self," she explains,

I would have done those kinds of things for her instead of letting her figure them out on her own...Oh and the fighting over hair; she would be wearing a pixie cut if it we had that kind of life!

When Eve speculates that a more rushed lifestyle would have either interfered with her daughter's mastery of a basic skill or would have shaped her appearance, she underscores the myriad ways that unschoolers identify their lifestyles as ones that encourage competence and autonomy in their children.

Without the pressing requirements of a day-care center or school, Madeline toileted "when she was ready" according to her father, Mike, who like many unschoolers, believes that "pushing" skills that range from toileting to reading pose significant, potentially damaging consequences for children's development. Like other unschoolers, Mike drew upon educational capital to explain his position and his understanding of child development, "I knew this in my gut, but [early parenting expert Penelope] Leach wrote about it as well." This example illustrates how, just as many unschoolers draw upon a myriad of sources to reinforce their evolving sense of expertise in their children's well-being in their early

In reflecting upon how her unschooling parents encouraged similar ideals, Claire Richards-Novak mused:

It's amazing what they let us wear. As long as we were warm and clean, it didn't much matter to them. So, there was the one winter where I wore my favorite blue jogging suit for weeks on end. Just the other day, Leila [her sister] and I were looking at these pictures of us wearing nightgowns over long-Johns and I turned to mom and said, "I *cannot* believe that you allowed us to go out of the house that way!" We all had a good laugh, because -- well, I can't imagine the looks that *she* got—but I really I think it's one of the ways [our parents] they showed us that what was important to us was important to them.

Thus, children's dressing themselves emerged as an essential lifestyle praxis for unschoolers and how they distinguish themselves from mainstream families. These practices of self-dressing habituate children into making "choices" for themselves and de-emphasize the parental role in such activities. Notably, self-dressing provides yet another embodied practice of a sense of agency and entitlement.

parenting, so too do they draw upon such sources to reinforce these sensibilities as their children develop over their life course.

Madeline usually heads downstairs and eats breakfast -a meal that she sometimes prepares by herself and sometimes for her whole family. Otherwise, she might get to the business of playing until she feels hungry. Eve claims that she tries to avoid the sense that she runs an “all-day kitchen.” Yet, she has strong concerns about food and control; she wants her daughter to “tune in to her own body” so that she has a sense of self-awareness and agency over her person.

Consequently, like many unschooling parents, Eve altered her kitchen in distinct ways that she feels help her to manage what she sees as a clear tension between the maternal labor required to enable foraging and her desire to help her children satisfy what she perceives as a need to forage or, in her terms, “graze” for food. Eve tries to keep “plenty of nutritious food” within easy reach for Madeline, who adeptly grazes throughout the day from the low shelves in the refrigerator and cabinets. In these places, Eve leaves the foods she prepares as well as child-sized plates, glasses, cutlery, and pitchers. A step-stool by the sink enables Madeline to rinse her own dishes and reach higher cabinets. In addition, Eve provides child-sized kitchen tools so that Madeline can prepare snacks and meals for herself, her friends, and her family. These items, common in unschoolers’ kitchens, enable Madeline to “help herself” without calling upon adults to supply immediate labor or supervision throughout the day.

This spatial organizing reflects unschooling principles of competence and foraging and, behind that, the notion that children allowed to tune into their needs can make appropriate choices for themselves while freeing up adults from supervision and assistance.

Yet such environments do not arise organically. Instead, unschooling parents like Eve and her husband alter, rather than eliminate, their labors in contrast to their “mainstream” counterparts. As Eve once explained:

I’m still the engineer, the shopper, the sous chef, and one of us usually has to make dinner and do the dishes, that’s usually Mike’s job [laughs], but Maddie’s getting more into those chores lately. So it’s not that it’s not work: it’s just that it’s pretty front ended. I just like that she can take what she needs without waiting around for me all day...or bugging me for food that she’s perfectly capable of getting herself.

That would annoy me!

Eve here illustrates how, as with other dimensions of their practices, unschoolers often foreground children’s needs over their own labors. In her tendency to focus on her own needs, i.e., what might “annoy” her, and how they shape her practices, Eve was somewhat unique among unschooling mothers I encountered. Eve nevertheless shares with other unschooling parents a conviction in the fundamental importance of “grazing” as a means to enable children to meet their bodily, emotional, and intellectual needs.

Eve shares the company of many unschoolers who focus upon bodily autonomy; the issue of control over bodily function recurred in almost every sustained conversation that I had with unschoolers about their motivations to homeschool. Unschoolers often critiqued and described as “inhumane” how conventional schools typically regulate when and how children can satisfy bodily needs that range from eating to elimination to physical activity. In contrast, unschoolers contend that their own practices accord their children control over their own bodies and, more broadly, over their own “needs” as learners.

Consequently, many unschoolers drew analogies between foraging and learning; parents contended that children who can “tune in” and retain control over their own “appetites” develop a well-balanced education. While this approach to foraging and self-knowledge was evident in their early parenting practices, it continued to develop throughout the unschooling experience. Yet, this analogy of foraging pre-supposes a particular type of “ground” upon which children can graze freely: ample in its nourishing resources and without “pesticides” or other harmful elements that interfere with foraging. Such ground conditions arise with considerable parental labor and through the advantages of cultural and economic capital, issues I consider in greater detail in chapter six.

Just as Madeline Small eats different types and amounts of food daily, the pace and order of her activities also varies daily. Although unschoolers often attribute this variation to the proclivities of children, it depends as much on caprices within her family as the demands of particular activities. Some days Madeline gets deeply involved in particular projects, as when she builds a fort in her bedroom, goes through her books, or helps bathe her baby brother, Connor. On such occasions, she might not make it downstairs, clothed or coiffed, until the late morning. This variable schedule reflects how her parents, Eve and Mike, prioritize what they call “deep engagement” in a particular activity over routines. To be sure, Eve once explained that she can “hustle her out the door with the best of them when necessary.” However, while some unschooling families prefer morning routines, the Smalls, like many other unschoolers, can vacillate comfortably between routine or what Eve and other unschoolers call a “slow start” (a term akin to Jill Peters’ “‘If You Give a Mom a Muffin’ morning”) with significant consequences for the flow of daily events.

For example, this slower start characterized the scene when I arrived at the Small home one morning at eleven o'clock. Madeline, still in her pajamas, screwdriver in hand, barely looked up to greet me. She intently focused on a step-stool, which she assembled as a gift for a friend's second birthday. I relieved Eve, who was also breastfeeding Conor, of the task of bracing the stool for Madeline. For the next few minutes, as Madeline finished the stool, we all discussed the many uses of a step stool for a two year-old.¹⁰⁸ When Madeline left to find paper to make gift-wrapping for the step stool (an additional project that delayed dressing until after what became brunch almost an hour later), Eve discussed the morning's events in terms of the tempos of unschooling.

Eve contended that the "flexible pace" of unschooling enables her daughter to develop competencies that might have to wait or might not happen if they "lived by" a school curriculum, with its "rigid clock and calendar." Eve mused about the local nursery school:

I don't think that they teach four year-olds, especially four year-old *girls* how to build a stool there...Besides, [even if they did] who knows if Maddie would've been *interested* when they were ready to teach it?

Here, like other unschoolers, Eve identifies the uniqueness of her child's experience in contrast to what she perceives of as mainstream curriculum. Somewhat typically among unschoolers, Eve also asserts that her family's practices provide children, like her daughter, the opportunity to engage in what she perceives of as typically male-gendered activities. In this way, Eve, like other unschoolers, perceives her practices as countercultural in terms of

¹⁰⁸ The gift itself, a step stool, personified the Small's unschooling principle of encouraging young people's competent access to their environments. As the type of device that enabled such access, step stools were a common feature in unschoolers' homes and a fitting gift for a two year-old from an unschooling family such as the Smalls.

gendered education. Notably, this assertion takes on a feminized cast; the unschoolers I encountered in person and in the movement's public sphere typically emphasize the benefits of unschooling for raising strong, competent, outspoken *girls*.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, many in the movement assert that unschooling liberates many boys from the stigmas and practices associated with "ADD/ADHD" assignation, which they construe as a misconstruction of "normal," yet boisterous, boyhood. These countercultural constructions of gender and gendered education seem to presuppose that schools and mainstream society themselves embody static notions of gender.

Moreover, Eve paid little attention to the fact that she herself played a role in helping Madeline in this "self-directed" work or that she initiated the gift, which required assembly whether or not Madeline participated. Eve instead speculated that her daughter's interest in the stool emerged organically, out of a desire to prepare a friend's gift, join her mother, or "for some other reason that I have no idea about!" Eve continued, "The point is, it doesn't matter why, but *now* was the time that she got into it."

When Eve assesses her daughter's activities in this way, she connects the unschooling principles of raising competent children with the flexibility and self-direction that she believes arise organically from the cadences of her family's lifestyle. Her comments also aptly captured how many unschoolers approach inspiration or interest as an idiosyncratic matter: something difficult to understand and even more difficult to inspire with a set agenda that takes place on a particular clock or calendar. She contrasts these to a schooled setting, which she sees as "rigid, narrow, and inflexible," and the traits of

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, *A Sense of Self: Listening to Homeschooled Girls* in which unschooling advocate Susannah Sheffer weighs in on the debates over "girls" self-esteem. She asserts that homeschooled girls do not experience the types of self-esteem issues and "loss of voice" that educational and psychological researchers found in studies conducted in the 1990s, notably with middle-class, Caucasian girls. (c.f. AAUW 1991, 1992; Gilligan 1990, 1991, 1992).

conventional schooling that she speculates “would limit everything.” When I asked Eve to elaborate on what she meant, she contended that schools limit the range of children’s possible activities and, consequently, their ability to “find their own work” and experience competence “on their own terms.”

Like other unschoolers, Eve constructs such restrictions as “ultimately lethal to motivation.” She elaborates:

It’s this really coercive situation and most kids just give up after a while. You have these competing agendas between what the teacher *has* to do, or at least what she thinks she has to do by a certain point in the year, and what the kid might be interested in. And, of course, the teacher wins, so that the kid gets the message that what she feels she *needs* or wants to do isn’t important.

Like many other unschoolers, Eve has considerable facility with the structures of conventional schooling and even of some alternative schools. She thus tempers her sense of sadness for the conditions of schoolchildren and her critiques of schooling with an understanding of the temporal and other structural constraints that she sees at work in schools. Yet, she still takes a sarcastic tone when she describes how these constraints affect children:

Even the best schools need to organize how things go in order to avoid chaos. I don’t blame them for that, ’cause in that situation, you’re just bound to run into this ‘micro-management’ arrangement, you know? Where things are planned for kids to the most minute detail from the bottom on up. You know, on a task-by-task, period-by-period, day-by day schedule that just can’t tolerate one little girl saying, “But wait! I have to build a step stool for my friend!” ’cause it’s just not in the

schedule; it would cause chaos. Can't have any of that free thinkin'. And that, of course, is how you get your em-ploy-ee.

Like Scott Mackler and Wendi Brice and some of the unschoolers I encountered, Eve understands and sympathizes with what she interprets as some of the sources of stricture in schooling that she finds objectionable.¹¹⁰ Like many unschoolers, Eve nevertheless draws out her perennial concern over how her children spend their childhoods with a concern over the types of adults that they will become. In Eve's case, she often suggests that her family unschools so that her children not grow to be "em-ploy-ees," a term that she uses to refer to people who lack control over their time and/or their labor. In this way, unschoolers see the unfettered tempos of their children's lives as early training in maintaining control over their time and affairs.

Eve draws this preference from her own (always well-paid) work experiences, first as an aerospace engineer on a design team where she had, "relative autonomy but still needed to answer to other people about how I spent my time," and her current part-time work as a real-estate investor. She wishes, instead to "...raise an uppity daughter, who can think for herself, control her own time and create satisfying work that she loves." Eve often adds a gendered cast to her talk about raising girls: she frequently articulates what she perceives as the gendered dimensions of women in mainstream society not controlling their own time, labor, and money and sees unschooling as the remedy for these ills.

Thus, unschooling parents like the Smalls see "free thinking" as a direct and desirable consequence of having the time (and other resources) to act on one's interests. They find these attributes essential to self-directed work in adulthood as well as in

¹¹⁰ Kariane Nemer (2004) offers a rich analysis of homeschooling parents who sympathize with and support public schools.

childhood. Conversely, many unschoolers like Eve see conventional schools as contexts that cannot manage this range of variation and, consequently, produce adults who have difficulty valuing or advocating for their own time and work. Thus, even as Eve identifies some of the privileges of her lifestyle and some of the strictures upon schooling, she articulates wishes to cultivate similarly privileged traits in her daughter. In summary, many unschoolers contend that they value the competences and confidence that they believe unschooling accords through its idiosyncratic cadences, which emerge when they enable children to more or less follow their own interests.

The Life Of A Project / The Project Of A Life: Giving Work Time

Unschoolers also see as a gift the longer units of time that their lifestyles accord their children. They claim that much of the work that occupies their children's time operates on a different clock and calendar than the periods of time that schools accord children, such as a "period," a "unit," a "semester," or a "school year." Certainly, unschoolers do not eschew scheduled commitments altogether; for example, many see a value in scheduled commitments as part of an ongoing "life-long" process of becoming a musician, artist, writer, reader, community member, etc. Nevertheless, unschoolers feel that their practices protect and nurture children's curiosities and talents over time. They see the long-durée cadences of their lifestyles as a contrast to what they perceive as the "mind-numbing" effects of school schedules and curricula, which they feel discount children's interests and affinities.

Many unschooling parents also contend that an unschooling lifestyle provides the time for their children to see a project through to fruition and thus to experience their own sense of "completion" in their work. Unschoolers provided a myriad of examples of this

perspective throughout my research, and pointed to work that their children might leave out and return to for hours or days at a time as the most frequent examples. For instance, nine-year-old David and four-year-old Anna Fields played with a small Legos “zoo” for four days in their otherwise tidy living-room. Owen Peters, age five, told his mother, Jill, that he’d had “enough for now” after he took a fifteen-minute turn trying to read aloud from the *Harry Potter* book that they had been reading together for weeks. After a family weekend at Annapolis, Celia Gordon, age seven, continued for days to draw its harbor at a corner of the dining room table. When unschoolers point out similar examples, they typically claim that the rhythms of conventional school interfere with children’s self-defined sense of completion.

In contrast to what they perceive as their children’s ability to seek out and produce closure on their work, unschooling parents often draw upon their own experiences with schooling and use the symbol of the school bell to affix their critiques of how schooling temporalities influence people’s sense of their work and their work environments: “When the bell rings, it’s over, no matter how engrossed you might be at the moment,” Celia’s mother, Cindy Gordon, once explained. Like other unschoolers that I encountered, Cindy offered a corollary to this perspective: “On the other hand, I remember the frustration of waiting for the bell to ring after you’ve completed a task, or you’ve lost interest, or never had it in something. It’s interminable!”

While Cindy, like other unschoolers, draws her interpretation of the school bell from her own experiences with schooling, academics have also addressed her critique. In anthropologist Nancy Munn’s (1992) terminology, the school bell represents one of the modes through which contemporary institutions produce temporal “governance” or the

incorporation of individuals. Unschoolers see this clearly, for the symbol of the malevolent school bell pervades the discourses of the movement. Parents, writers, and the occasional older unschooler who has experienced school suggest that schooling temporalities, symbolized by the school bell's demarcation of time fostered inattention, resentment, boredom, and alienation from one's work.

Many unschooling parents were quick to identify this bell-free aspect of their distinctive lifestyles as essential to children's development. "It seems to me," Scott Mackler once explained, "that you need to know that you can *complete a job*, whatever that job may be." When I asked him how that differs from children completing jobs at school, Scott raised his eyebrows and asked if I was joking. I explained that I wished to hear *his* words on the matter, so he articulated the positive relationships between time, autonomy, and motivation which he believes unschooling fosters and which schools do not:

Well, *we believe* that it's important, for a whole bunch of reasons like self-esteem and autonomy and freedom and competence, little things like that [laughs], to chose one's *own* work. And from there, *we believe*, people are more *invested* in their work and more likely to want to complete it. And if they're stuck, I think they're more likely to work through it, whether it's asking for help or innovating another solution, because they've set their own purpose, unlike in schools. We've seen it with our kids time and again.

Although Scott put joking emphasis throughout his discourse because he knew that I wanted, on record, to encapsulate what I had learned from his and other families, he nevertheless succinctly articulated how unschoolers perceive the "gift of time," which they identify as essential in the cultivation of competent young people. The cadences of

unschoolers daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly lives offer them what they perceive as distinct opportunities for their children to develop into competent, self-knowing, young people.

Now that I have considered in detail the lifestyle dimensions of space and time in an unschooling home, I find it essential to consider how unschoolers construe their homes as interactional and “trust”-based environments in which to cultivate their children’s sense of competence and agency.

“Help Yourself” Some More: Competent Participation In Home Life

Moving through an unschooling home, one can get a sense that unschoolers seek to accord children as much independence and as many opportunities to competently navigate and fashion their environments as possible. In some households, the efforts appear more deliberate than others. Below, I briefly detail a few such signifiers and discuss how unschooled children use them, and where relevant, how unschooling parents make sense of these features.

The homes of middle-class families who have toddlers and young children often have step stools, particularly in bathrooms. However, unschoolers with children of the same age or whose households frequently entertain young children, seem to have step stools and other child-boosting apparatus (such as chairs pulled up to counters) throughout their homes in places that appear atypical. Step stools make it easier for small children to participate in family activities, such as food preparation and laundry; they also make it easier for children to care for themselves, whether to wash, gather food or drink, or to climb onto a countertop to access materials within cabinets. Again, while such items may be common to non-unschoolers’ homes, a distinctive adult attitude of “help yourself” and, in many cases, “help

out” pervades the homes of unschoolers.

Thus, I learned very quickly to treat as normal and not offer help or express concern about possible mishaps when, for example, a nineteen-month-old would climb cabinets and reach into the sink to help herself to a glass of water or when a two-and-a-half-year-old scaled a kitchen counter to prepare himself a peanut butter sandwich. Self-directed activities such as these characterized these children’s habits at home. Generally, their parents rarely worried about falls, messes, or other mishaps. More often than not, unschooling parents took pains to overcome their own experiences in being mistrusted as children and to instead refrain from commenting or physically responding to their children’s potentially risky activity, lest their children mistrust themselves.

Many unschooling parents expressed beliefs that mainstream parenting practices that conveyed mistrust taught children to unlearn their sense of balance on an embodied level and their sense of competence more generally. These parents typically indicated that their own children were agile and rarely got hurt. They often attributed their children’s agility and “self-mastery” to a combination of adult attitudes and to their own attachment parenting practices, which they believe help their children retain their “instincts.” As Scott Mackler explained:

You have to know your kid, of course –and unschoolers know their kids, but in most instances, children can be very careful and very balanced, both physically and when they make choices over what to do...It’s people who are in an environment saturated with doubt, you know, people telling you that that they’re going to fall, or make a mess, or over-do it, that makes you kind of clumsy or helpless, you know?

Like many unschoolers, Scott felt that clumsiness and general tendencies towards imbalance

emerge as a learned response, which parents can avoid instilling in their children. To illustrate the role that he believed adult attitudes play in nurturing or undermining competence and confidence, Scott drew upon an anecdote from outside of the unschooling world:

I just read this interview with a world-class rock climber. They asked him what his parents said to encourage his climbing. It was simple, “If you fall from that tree, it’s going to hurt, so hang on tight!” I love that “if.” Instead of a warning that something bad *is* going to happen, which usually doesn’t, and there’s the idea of how to be strong instead of weak.

In this example, Scott underscores the importance that unschoolers place upon “trust.” Here the parent conveys trust in the child’s competence.

After Scott illustrated his idealized form of how to interact with children to encourage their competence, he returned to his own family’s experience: “Our kids rarely had mishaps, but when they did we tried to act calm and show them that, ‘Okay, the milk spilled. Here’s a sponge,’ or, ‘You spilled, let’s get a band-aid[sic],’” (chuckles). I encountered many unschoolers who, like Scott and his wife, sought to deflect their attention and concerns away from mishaps and continually sought strategies that they believe empower their children’s abilities to handle mishaps. Like Scott, unschooling parents typically expressed a desire to cultivate in their children the ability to face small adversities calmly.

I once observed Scott’s wife, Wendi, respond to a literal milk spill. A visiting two year-old, a sibling of one of their daughter Chole’s friends, tipped over her cup. Wendi hardly skipped a beat as she said “Oh, Marissa, see how that milk moves fast? Would you

like to use my sponge?” Then, in a way typical of how many unschooling parents “teach” each other, she turned to Marissa’s father, Mark, and said:

This is just fine. We spill all the time. We clean up spilled milk, you know, we don’t fuss or cry over it. When there’s a mess, we just clean it up. So that they get the idea that they have control in fixing messes.

After they left and I asked Wendi about the incident, she added, that she felt,

It’s important to show children that they have control over fixing some of the problems around them. After all, we’re looking to raise compassionate problem-solvers.

Here Wendi articulated a shared sense among unschoolers that parents can convey and foster competence and compassionate “problem solving” when they approach mishaps calmly and provide their children the tools to respond. While, overall, Wendi was somewhat unique among unschoolers to explicitly identify “compassion” as a trait that she sought to foster in her children, other unschoolers presupposed this as an outcome of unschooling. Further, many unschoolers used the phrase “problem-solver” to describe what they value in an educated person. The term indexes the ways that unschooling parents feel their practices prepare their children for particular kinds of work.

In other words, unschoolers often lodge their perspectives on raising “competent” young people in a psychologized framework of “self-actualization” or in a libertarian milieu that critiques schools for cultivating people who cannot competently identify and solve problems, as they learn, through schooling, to take direction from teachers. Unschoolers contend that such habits in schooling produce people who cannot manage life in the “real world.” And while unschoolers speak less often than Christian homeschoolers about raising

their children for “leadership,” they nevertheless seek to cultivate competent “problem solvers” within a wider vocational order. In this vocational order, their socialization practices advantage their children for work in which they will be called upon to solve problems, as opposed to taking directions from others. In other words, while unschoolers often deny the class-based dimensions of their practices, their dispositions and practices towards competence and problem-solving nevertheless socialize their children into the habits of managerial or independent work typical of middle and upper-classes.

One can read in the appointment of and interactions within unschoolers’ homes how they seek to cultivate “problem solving.” For example, in many unschooling homes, parents place children’s items, or the family items over which children have responsibility, in areas that children can access easily, i.e., without adult help. For example, when Jason Turner’s parents charged him, at age three, with setting the table, they moved all of the table items, including the plates, place mats, silverware, and cloth napkins onto the lowest shelf in the kitchen cabinets. To similar ends, many unschooling homes have hooks for children to hang their own clothing, not only in hall closets -a common practice in middle-class American homes-- but also in bedrooms, bathrooms, and in less expected areas, such as in garages, tool sheds, or other places where children might have objects for which they take responsibility.

Unschooling parents make many accommodations to accord their children access to materials while they minimize adult surveillance and regulation. Thus, many unschoolers seek out tools, whether for cooking, cleaning, or building, that accommodate children’s smaller scale. In a more general sense, many unschooling parents seek to avail their children of material resources, such as art supplies, books, clothing, and cleaning supplies, in ways

that minimize moment-to-moment reliance on adults for help. Thus, unschoolers' homes typically include open shelving for art materials, toys, books, and supplies. In addition, parents often lowered the rods in clothes closets so that children can select their own clothing. In a similar vein, many unschooling parents place clothes lines with clothes pins against the wall, at their children's eye level, so that their children can themselves decide which, if any, of their art work to display.

Unschoolers thus engage in an array of practices, spatial accommodations, and dispositions in their homes to encourage their children's competent participation in home life, which they see as the basis of competent participation in endeavors that move outside of the home. Parents revealed their orientations towards competence through attitudes and practices as well as through spatial cues. Invariably, the cleaning supplies that parents wished their children to use were accessible, rather than tucked away, and were often child-sized. These spatial cues revealed parental efforts to incorporate children in the responsibilities of caring for their environments and illustrated the practical workings out of the principles of "inclusion" that pervade unschoolers' praxis. In these ways, unschoolers seek to cultivate in their children habits of independence from adult authority over their work. In a wider sense, they indicate the ways in which unschooling parents seek to promote children who see their (competent) selves as the locus of authority in their lives.

Yet, unschooling parents rarely talk about their efforts in engineering such accommodations. Instead, as I have shown, unschooling parents typically highlight their children's competencies and thus occlude their own, often hidden, labors in constructing their homes as spatial, interactional and temporal environments in which their children can "forage" unimpeded.

IV. Conclusion: Lessons From Beyond “the Brink of Chaos:” Resources and Obstacles to Competent Foraging

In this chapter, I considered how unschoolers shape their children’s environments to enable their children to forage in a competent and generally independent manner. I also conveyed how unschoolers’ homes have a disorderly feel, what I early in my research characterized as “on the brink of chaos.” Unschoolers’ homes feel this way, perhaps, because the typical foregrounding of children’s activities produces, at least for adults, a sense of disorderliness. Yet, the “brink” and actual chaos are entirely different matters; few of the unschoolers in my study led chaotic lives. Instead, the cadences, spatial organization, and even interpersonal interactions in unschoolers’ homes typically had an underlying orderliness that reveals the hidden workings of specific kinds of resources. I have showed the workings of some of those resources: intense parental labor, typically maternal labor at home, and an often glaringly absent but significant paternal labor outside of the home.

Moreover, I conducted my research with families who enjoyed ample educational, social, and relatively ample economic capital. If Bourdieu has anything to advise us of the ways such resources suffuse the habitus of people and the environments that they produce and which culturally produce them, then these typical attributes likely shaped some of the underlying organizational dimensions of how unschoolers constructed their home environments. In addition, unschoolers typically draw upon these resources to put into balance some of the lived tensions of an unschooling pedagogy, such as freedom and order, self-direction, and accountability. The role of these resources came into high relief late in my research.

After I concluded much of my ethnographic research, I encountered a few anecdotes of “unschooling gone awry,” which suggested clear dysfunction, in all of these instances, the parents involved seemed to have equated unschooling with the extreme child-direction and laissez-faire parenting that critics outside the movement typically ascribe to it. For example, in one instance, the children involved had cavity-laden teeth as their mother felt that enforcing tooth-brushing and banning her children from eating whatever they wished (which included copious amounts of candy), would, in her words, “tread on their autonomy.” These children were also frequently fatigued for a lack of bedtime and naps. Moreover, when a custody battle resulted in the children’s mandatory attendance at a Montessori school, the children initially had difficulty getting along with other children as the mother had not taken great pains to cultivate in her children the habits of empathy that I noticed routinely among the families in my study. In these instances, the physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of the families involved were generally questionable and questionable by the standards of most of the unschoolers that I encountered.

I recounted this situation to a number of my informants to gain their perspective on both what “went awry” and as an entrée to understand what they perceive as the necessary resources for unschooling to work. I heard fairly consistent responses. While a number of parents seemed to identify what they perceived as defects in the mother, some offered a more circumspect, systemic approach. Wendi Brice for example, focused on supports and what I would construe as educational capital:

Maybe there’s this idea out there in the [unschooling] movement that *anyone* can homeschool. I don’t agree. I think that a whole lot more people can homeschool than we think because people seem to think that you need a whole lot of money to

be able to do it, but it's not really about the money. We know of too many single moms doing it on a shoe string and in these really creative ways for it to be about the money. You need supports, though. You know: resources, knowing how to connect with other people, that sort of thing. But the other thing is that you can't just go into this thinking that it's about letting kids run around doing whatever they want. That's scary for the kid; that's an adult relinquishing her role as guide....You have to find balance. It's like with giving a kid a knife. If you show them how to use it, it's a tool. Otherwise it's dangerous. If you can't read between the lines enough to know the difference, then you'll get that kind of catastrophe.

Here, Wendi articulates the countervailing forces that she and many unschoolers feel keep unschooling balanced. While she, too, hints that the mother in this instance relinquished her role as guide, she also focuses on the types of supports, such as social capital, that provide parents the ability to identify and draw upon resources in the community.

Additionally, Wendi's suggestion that one needs to "read between the lines" refers, I suspect, to the lines of child-centered discourse that run through much of the unschooling movement's public sphere. For, as a number of unschoolers in my study reiterated, the normative "child-direction" of unschooling refers to children directing their learning and enjoying autonomy over much of their time but, as many informants put it, "not running the show."

Many of the resources and interpretive skills that Wendi and other unschoolers indicated as necessary were absent in these "unschooling horror stories." In these cases, parents "didn't get" some dimension of unschooling; in all instances but one (in which both parents were terminally ill and counted on their teenaged son for primary care but described

his activities as unschooling), the parents seemed to lack both educational capital and social supports. I also came to recognize the operation, within my own data set, not only of high degrees of educational and/or social capital, but of an implicit, humanist, moral order that I had initially overlooked (perhaps because most of the unschoolers in my study don't identify as religious and rarely talk about morality per se; a disproportionate number identified as "U.U.s," that is Unitarian Universalists), that compelled many parents in my study to frame unschooling as a project of "humane" education. When they spoke of unschooling in these terms, they often meant a balance of self-direction and related responsibilities towards others, which they see as an outgrowth of their parenting practices.

Thus, when I re-examined my data from the perspective of these stories of unschooling gone awry, I noticed a number of key aspects of space and time that were central to both the unschoolers I studied as well as in the movement writ large. These include the hidden workings of an underlying ethic of "responsibility," couched in idioms of good "decision making," as well as a tacit understanding that the parents retain a role as guide, however gingerly they may perform that role. These key orientations toward holistic education are what critics (particularly in the Christian homeschooling movement) have described as "permissive" parenting among unschoolers. In other words, the pervasive discourses that focus on "child direction" obscure the considerable work that parents do to attenuate the unbalanced and potentially destructive elements of a child-led lifestyle. Consequently, the outlier anecdotes show how educational capital buttresses the fine line between alternative and deviant behavior. They reinforced my contention that unschoolers, much like their schooling counterparts, draw upon many hidden resources, such as social and educational capital, an implicit moral order, and gendered ideology, all of which

influence how parents shape their children's educational contexts as well as their efforts to cultivate children who can "forage" competently in their homes and communities.

In this chapter, I considered how unschoolers accomplish their countercultural lifestyle through distinct temporal, spatial, and interactional use of their homes as contexts for their children's education. In attending to unschoolers' practical actions and movements of their daily lives at home, I showed how members of unschooled families learn about the social relations and local worldviews of the unschooling countercultural endeavor and set them as distinct from the constructed mainstream. I also discussed how unschoolers engage in what they perceive as idiosyncratic, child-led activities, which they believe accommodate, rather than stigmatize, "normal" childhood behavior. In addition, I considered what unschooling parents mean when they describe themselves as "available" or "resource brokers," rather than parent-teachers, to their children. My attention to the temporal aspects of unschoolers' home lives revealed what they mean when they assert that their practices accord their children relatively unhurried childhoods, through which they can develop competences, affinities, and self-knowledge. Finally, I considered how unschoolers appoint their homes to encourage children's competent and independent foraging. Throughout the consideration of these dimensions of unschoolers' home lives, I detailed how parental attention to children's activities at times occlude how such environments arise as the result of considerable parental labor and as a consequence of distinct forms of privilege.

Unschoolers construct their homes as distinctive environments not only for what they include, but also for what they exclude. As a dimension of their countercultural experiences, unschoolers engage in distinctive consumption habits into which they socialize

their children and through which they set boundaries to the mainstream world. I consider these distinctive dimensions of unschoolers' lifestyles and how they make sense of them in the following chapter.

Ch. 6. “You Can’t Forage If Your Pantry’s Full Of Junk Food”: Consumption And Boundaries to Protect Foraging

When people ask about the “un” in unschooling, you know: “Why so negative?” I usually just try to explain that you can’t forage if your pantry’s full of junk food. It’s just too much interference.

-Eve Small (field notes April 12, 2002)

Unschoolers seek to exclude “junk” and interference from their environment because they associate these as objectionable influences from so-called “mainstream” culture. In affirming these choices, they delimit “boundaries” between their world and what they construe as the mainstream culture. Unschoolers construct these boundaries through many dimensions of lifestyle. These include the distinctive ways they parent, experience time and space, and how they interact with children, which I considered in previous chapters.

Unschoolers’ principles and practices regarding consumption constitute an additional and distinguishing dimension of their lifestyles. Their consumption habits reveal how they deliberately and tacitly demarcate the distinctive and valued aspects of their countercultural lifestyles. The range of strategies unschoolers take to manage consumer encounters also provides a vantage point onto how they seek to equip their children with responses to the challenges of “mainstream culture” that they will invariably encounter as they move into the world beyond their homes.

In this chapter, I consider unschoolers’ distinctive consumer practices and how they construct boundaries to or norms of consumption to protect their children’s development. In previous chapters, I showed how unschoolers treat “foraging,” the principle of allowing their children to “take what they need” with regard to either food or to the more educative

stuff, as an essential element of their principles and practices. While unschoolers treat foraging as a natural process, the “nourishing” environment is a culturally constructed space; it contains that which unschoolers believe people need and excludes items and practices that interfere with a child’s ability to forage. Many unschoolers contend that just as foods with little nutritive value can undermine a person’s ability to “tune in” to her/his body, so too, experiences with little developmental value can undermine or interfere with a person’s self-understanding. To protect their children from the encroachment of what they perceive as the deleterious effects of interference, unschoolers engage in various consumption practices that they construe as critical of mainstream habits. In constructing boundaries through consumption, parents first create a bounded environment including the types of food, materials and experiences that will nurture a child’s natural ability to forage. They also create boundaries as they model or assist their children in developing norms for consumption of both educational experiences and lifestyle by being critical of the choices of those in mainstream culture and reinforce the social boundary to the mainstream.

Thus, in this chapter, I consider, from the wider perspective of protection or boundary-making, a number of unschoolers’ consumer preferences and practices and how they seek to cultivate these in their children. I first provide a brief background on how I approach consumption. I then consider, in turn, how unschoolers engage in and construe three pivotal objects of consumption: Food, Toys and Television. For these facets of lifestyle reveal profoundly the workings of unschoolers’ efforts to cultivate their children’s (continued) ability to “forage.” Unschoolers’ consumer preferences in these areas also reveal their wider and continued critiques with mainstream society in general and, in many instances, of what they perceive as “schooling.” Yet, regardless of their preferences and

critiques, unschooling families must feed, play with and otherwise occupy their children in a world of mass food, toy and media production. I thus also consider how unschoolers manage these forms of consumption through many of the difficulties that they encounter in negotiating the lived or enacted aspects of their critiques.

I chose to examine orientations to the consumption of three types of commodities, food, toys and television that are key to unschooling countercultural practice for a number of reasons. I begin with food, a contested site of consumption that provides an analogy for the ways that unschoolers seek to cultivate self-knowing children who can “read the labels” or engage in critical consumption practices. Unschooler’s approaches to toys and play, on the other hand provide an entrée onto how they produce alternative constructions of the work of childhood more generally. Finally, while unschoolers share with many other television-averse people some basic principles and practices regarding the medium, the ways that they typically critique television consumption also reveal a counterculturally constructed and metaphoric relationship with what they perceive as schooling. Moreover, the ways in which they actually engage with television reveal some of the ways in which unschoolers enact compromises between their critiques and the realities of daily life.

Thus I explore how the range of unschoolers’ consumer practices entails both critiques of and boundary maintenance between unschooling and “mainstream” lifestyles as well as some inherent contradictions. For example, while unschoolers typically take an anti-consumerist stance with respect to food, toys and television, they often (although not exclusively) engage in either simplified or highly rarified consumer practices. In the latter case, their consumer preferences are often costly in terms of money or in parental (typically maternal) outlays of time and/or effort, which complicate the notion of “simplicity,” that

many unschoolers espouse.¹¹¹ Below, I consider the details of some of these contradictions. First, however, I offer a brief and general explanation of how I approach consumption as a framework for analysis and as an object of unschoolers' discourse.

I. Unschoolers And Consumption

Unschoolers, like many other groups that have emerged, have both conscious and unconscious style markers, which we see in their consumption practices. Much has been said about consumption patterns and the outward expression of group identity. Dick Hebdidge and Daniel Miller, for example, attend to subcultural groups' more consciously selected style markers, which could apply, in some respects, to unschoolers (Hebdidge 1991; Miller 2001). However, when I consider unschooling and consumption, I more directly follow Pierre Bourdieu, who aptly revealed in *Distinction* how consumption practices serve as a fruitful site for accessing how people distinguish themselves, often subtly, (even unconsciously), from others, particularly others of different social classes (1984 [1991]).

Certainly, unschoolers are not of a separate class; rather, they typically hail from the educated middle class in the United States and bear its distinctive stylistic markers in their approaches to consumption (Kusserow 2004; Fussell 1983; Brooks 2000; Miller 2001). Many unschoolers characteristically speak of "consumption" as an object of critical discourse. In related terms, they often characterize mainstream society as "consumer-oriented," meaning fixated on the acquisition of consumer products

As I note throughout my consideration of unschoolers' consumer practices, when unschoolers talk about consumption, they typically do so metaphorically, albeit with occasional contradiction. They use consumption as a stand-in for both "mainstream"

¹¹¹ See Grigsby 2004 for similar findings about the "voluntary simplists" that she studied.

American society and the educative processes that they critique and seek to counter through their unschooling principles and practices. For example, many unschoolers speak of the processes of schooling in food metaphors such as “spoon feeding,” children “pre-packaged” curricula. In contrast, they construct unschooling not as a process of consumption but of *production*, what many describe as “active” learning or “learning by doing.” Similarly, just as they prefer home-based, individually-constructed education, many unschoolers express preferences for small-scale production, compared to what they (and those of earlier countercultures) perceive as the typical mass-production of the ‘mainstream.’

Unschoolers often speak of themselves as “non-consumers” or “critical – consumers.” To most families, this means that they eschew rather than abstain from commercial forms of consumption. Unschoolers’ consumption preferences and practices reveal the contradictions of what Theodore Roszak termed ‘conspicuous non-consumption’¹¹² of mass-produced, mass-distributed commodities. Roszak used this term to describe how those in the 1960s counterculture who sought to actively critique what they deemed rampant consumption in their day (1969). Yet, like the conspicuous non-consumers of earlier days, unschoolers, often substitute --rather than eliminate altogether-- these consumer items through distinctive preferences and practices.

Unschoolers’ attempts to identify clear boundaries around what they disdainfully refer to as “junk,” particularly junk food, junk toys and junk media, reveal a countercultural normativity (albeit with a range of variation) in their consumption practices. In some

¹¹² David Brooks actually uses this term to summarize the hippie critique of the middle classes in the 1960s. Summarizing Theodore Roszak’s account, Brooks explains that “The bourgeois practiced conspicuous consumption, so the students practices conspicuous nonconsumption,” (Brooks 2000:78. see also Roszak 1969). I contend that unschoolers orientations towards mainstream consumer practices, as they define them, entail a similar conspicuous character, albeit with a contemporary rationale, often based on concerns about contagions, trade practices that preserve the integrity of workers’ rights and the environment, etc. For a careful and critical treatment of this phenomenon in the ‘Voluntary Simplicity’ simplicity movement, see Gribbsby, 2004.

instances, given consumption practices pit several unschooling principles in a contradictory relationship. The stories and examples I offer below reveal how unschoolers at times draw upon various resources (whether from unschooling theory or other resources such as their educational capital and intense parental labor) to reconcile such contradictions. Moreover, unschoolers' somewhat contradictory consumer principles and practices reveal the ways that their efforts to instantiate their alternative principles at home and to inculcate their children into their preferences are often predicated upon ample capital, whether economic, social, or educational. They also reveal the workings of parental (often maternal) labor transferred into copious amounts of time involved in putting their consumption preferences into practice.

II. *"I'll Read Her Every Label In The Supermarket If I Have To!"* : Critical Food Consumption and the Valorization of the "Home-Made"

As a fundamental dimension of lifestyle, food constitutes a highly contested realm of consumption. This is no less the case among unschoolers, many of whom express preoccupations with nutrition as well as concerns about food production and distribution. For many unschooling parents, these concerns, which often generate various forms of emergent, alternative expertise, often develop in concert with their alternative parenting practices and engagements as participants in the unschooling countercultural experience. While such phenomena may not be unique to unschoolers, they often attribute additional meanings to their food-based principles and practices. Specifically, their typical approaches to food reflect several dimensions of an unschooling cultural logic. These not only revolve around erecting boundaries to and critiques of the mainstream world but also cultivating

self-knowing children who can “read the labels” or engage in critical consumption practices more generally. Moreover, many unschoolers treat these goals as part of their wider educational or parenting missions; they often critique schools as places where children are not taught such skills.

Most of the unschoolers I encountered set the consumption of “good” or “quality” foods --a term that often indexes organically grown, additive-free consumables-- as a normative preference and a budgetary priority. These preferences fit into an unschooling cultural logic, which valorizes that which is perceived as “natural,” friendlier to the environment, and/or the result of smaller-scaled production and distribution. They oppose these preferences to “artificial,” mass-produced and distributed commercial commodities. This countercultural logic often extended to how unschoolers approached childrearing and education. The unschooling public sphere is riddled with the phrase “home-grown kids,” to describe unschooled children. In fact, I encountered a number of unschoolers using the term “free-range,” (a term borrowed from agriculture and used to distinguish as healthier, the grazing patterns of cattle and poultry), as a modifier for the term “childhood,” to describe the experience of growing up unschooled.¹¹³

Unschoolers expressed a range of ways through which food preferences did and did not serve as boundaries to people. For example, some instances of talk about food revealed how unschoolers occasionally critiqued mainstream neighbors and family members for *their* food consumption choices. Thus, when Vanessa Fields explained to a group of unschooled families why she discontinued attending a science explorers homeschooling group (in which hers was the only unschooling family among mostly Christian homeschoolers), she indicated

¹¹³ The term has also been used to describe other alternative forms of education. See for example Mathew Appleton’s (2000) treatment of the Summerhill School experience in *A Free Range Childhood: Self Regulation at Summerhill School*.

that it was not just the overt religiosity of the group that she found alienating, but also their food consumption practices, which she described as very similar to those of people in the mainstream. As soon as she described the group as a “Doritos and juice box crowd,” her nodding unschooled interlocutors required no further explanation. As a group of mothers who identify themselves as caring about providing their children with nutritious food, they understood that Vanessa disdained what she perceived as a type of mindless consumption at work behind the science group’s lack of effort to provide healthy snacks. This exchange reveals the ways that unschoolers sometimes use food preferences and consumer habits as a way to distinguish themselves from and to negatively characterize those with mainstream or in Vanessa’s words, “less mindful,” food habits.

On the other hand, some unschoolers find this type of ‘collective othering,’ or differentiating between groups of *people* on the basis of lifestyle choices to be itself disdainful. To illustrate this point, Eve Small, for example, conveyed two stories. In the first, she explains to me why she objects to such boundary making; the second reveals her alternative:

So I’m online peeking into a natural parenting group and I’m reading a posting where this unschooling mom, I’ll call her Sally, is complaining about other mothers at the park. First, off she says that they weren’t “minding their kids,” and I must say that I’m surprised that she’s an unschooler at all... I have some very principled reasons why I let my children play “unattended” at the park...I mean, there’s no need to hover. Anyway, then she describes the junk food snacks that they had and then recounts what these two moms were talking about. She *overheard* one mom complain about how her son hardly eats anything, sometimes he likes macaroni and cheese or something but that he *won’t* eat healthy food. So this Sally walks up to

them and talks about how she gives her son steamed *kale* with pasta and how he just loves vegetables. What a bitch! First of all, no one asked her. Second of all, that kind of comment can just push someone over the edge. Third, what a nasty way to divide women! Just feed your own kids and leave well enough alone!

When Eve questions whether Sally is actually an unschooler, she illustrates how in some instances, unschoolers police the boundaries of who can be identified legitimately as successfully “unschooling” in practice; they impose norms as a way of identifying authentic practice. Moreover both “Sally’s” actions and Eve’s frustration with them reveals a range of tolerances in terms of how unschoolers responses to others’ food (and in this case parenting) habits. Like some unschoolers, Sally finds herself frustrated by how other people feed their children and feels emboldened to share her ideas and practices. Eve instead finds this approach to other people’s food habits overbearing.

To illustrate her point, Eve followed up the story about Sally with an example of how her family handled a somewhat similar encounter:

We also once had an experience at the park during lunch like that. As it happened, I’d ran out the house and really quickly grabbed just these whole foods, some oranges and edamame and maybe a handful of nuts or something. And Maddie started playing with this girl for a while. And when the girl and her mom started taking out their food, Maddie asked me about it. It was like a bag of chips and fruit punch and these ring-dings or something like that. The food had no redeeming features but instead of saying ‘It’s a bunch of junk,’ I suggested that we share our lunches. I figured the exposure wouldn’t hurt either girl and I’m trying to teach Maddie to share instead of judge, you know?

This example points to a situation where two sets of values conflict—value of teaching one’s child what to identify as “junk” and to teach them to share and not judge others. It thus reveals how, much like other unschoolers, Eve cultivates *permeable* boundaries around her children’s food consumption. She puts relatively tight controls over what comes into her own home and makes considerable efforts to bring the types of foods she prefers into her children’s non-home experiences. For example, like many unschoolers I encountered, she generally packs snacks and lunches from home when going out. Eve nevertheless demonstrates flexibility in what her children consume when encounters arise that include other people with habits that differ from those of her family.

Like many unschoolers, Eve typically draws upon and reinforces for herself the “wisdom” of unschooling principles as she described them, in socializing her children into the habits of what she perceives as good nutrition. Having ‘cue’ breastfed her children, and availed them of the types of foods she thinks are most beneficial to them, Eve allows her children to “forage” in their home. She generally feels confident in their ability to tune into their bodies to find balance in what they need. In other words she draws upon and reinscribes through food consumption practices the unschooling countercultural logic of “trusting” her children.

She trusts that her children will learn through their bodies the ill effects of what she perceives and describes as “Junky food.” Thus, rather than forbidding junk food altogether, Eve encourages her children to ‘learn for themselves’ the consequences of their food choices. At Halloween, for example, Eve and Mike Small decided to try a “candy blitz” with their fiveyear-old daughter, Madeline. Earlier in the summer, they tried a “TV blitz”

(described below), which they deemed successful.¹¹⁴ Could the same work for a candy blitz? Eve had gotten the idea from “Lorna,” one of her mentors in unschooling, whose foster daughter, 7 year-old Michaela, was one of Madeline’s playmates:

Lorna said that she used to just put all of her kid’s favorite candies into a drawer. She would say, ‘Here are your favorites; knock yourself out!’ and she simply believed that their bodies would point them in the right direction. You know, after like 8 Snickers bars, you kind of get sick of them and don’t care that more aren’t coming until next week. And [Lorna’s] kids are 31, 28, 23, 19 and 7, so I kinda trust that it worked out.... Of course, [the process] takes courage and faith that your kid can tune in to her body.

When I asked Lorna about this practice in her family, she explained that it took the “stress” out of candy both for herself and her children. She also indicated that she refilled the candy bowl only once weekly. Eve found this approach credible, both because it came with the endorsement of a person she called a “veteran unschooler” and because it harmonized with the general principles and practices about cultivating in her child the habits of bodily self-awareness that she had developed as an unschooling mother.

While Eve claimed that most of these ideas about trusting her daughter emerged from her ongoing observations as a parent, by watching and reading about other unschooling families, and by ‘reading up’ on nutrition, I wondered if her “faith” applied to *all* children or if it rested in specific habituated practices. I asked her whether or not she could think of exceptions where this approach to allowing a child to set her or his limits to “junk food” might not work. She explained:

Well, it depends on how kids are raised around food and candy, I think. Also their

¹¹⁴ For details, see section on “television” practices below.

age. I wouldn't do it with Connor yet—he's too young and just learning about sugar. But Maddie has been programmed to trust her instincts....And I certainly help that along with lots of programming. I mean if she looks like she hasn't had anything good to eat in a while or she starts to act crabby, I might say things like, "It looks like you're hungry and maybe you need something good to eat," that kind of thing. In this sense, Eve illustrates a refinement of how unschoolers frequently approach their trust in children's abilities to forage in the face of interference; children become more trustable when they reach particular developmental stages. This example also reveals several types of subtle maternal labors at work. For example, although Eve foregrounds her "trust" in Madeline, she also indicates an ongoing process of "programming," her daughter to recognize what Eve perceives as symptoms of hunger. Eve actively shapes her daughter's sense of "bodily instincts" as she often describes them, with these types of reminders. In addition, she draws different boundaries for her son based upon her assessment of his capacities and experiences. These boundaries will require a different set of practices for reinforcement until Eve judges her son as capable of "tuning in" to his body and self-regulating his food intake.

These calculated practices bring into higher relief that, contrary to some of their assertions, unschoolers like Eve do not simply act on a faith in their children's natural abilities. Instead, they actively shape or cultivate in their children the habits of responding to different forms of interference even as they "tune in" to their own needs. Ironically, Eve claims to "trust" what she calls her daughter's "instincts." Yet, by Eve's own admission, these instincts as well as Eve's trust in them arise through careful habituation, or in Eve's words, "programming."

Eve later confidently described the candy blitz as successful. This confidence revealed another instance of a wider confidence in the workings of her home. Like other unschoolers I encountered, she expressed a sense of ongoing success in her own and her husband's efforts to cultivate in their child the ability to "tune in" to her body and self-regulate in the face of interference. While Eve was hardly reticent in expressing her sense of her own successes as a parent, this conversation was one of the rare instances in my research in which an unschooling parent credited intense parental cultivation with producing the habits and "self-knowledge" that unschoolers often treat as arising "naturally" in children.

These processes built over time. Like many unschoolers, Eve engages in a myriad of efforts in her home to provide her children a language through which to 'tune into' and talk about their bodies. These forms of talk range from frequent talk about her own food needs, "I'm feeling cranky and a little hungry right now," to subtle suggestions in the form of observations: "Maddie, you seem like you could use a snack," when her daughter becomes cranky as a result of what Eve perceives as low blood sugar. She also engages in more directive forms of talk designed to both teach what she perceives as basic nutrition and put the responsibility of figuring out how to address bodily needs on the child her/himself.

For example, Madeline once asked for an oatmeal cookie in the middle of the morning. Rather than provide a specific answer, Eve responded in a manner that I came to see as almost formulaic among unschoolers:

When you ask me about having that oatmeal cookie, I think about all those carbohydrates flooding your bloodstream at once. Will you think about something that you can eat with a little protein to help you process all that?

In this typically unschooler-like response, Eve makes a deliberate effort to reveal to her daughter her thinking. She also invites her to come up with her own, solution. Eve thus met Madeline's suggestion for a handful of nuts and some milk as accompaniments to the oatmeal with outward approval. For her daughter's solution demonstrated to Eve an awareness of the nutritional preferences of the Small household, i.e. for "balance."¹¹⁵ It also revealed that Madeline could come up with what her mother perceived of as her "own," solution. Clearly the nuts and milk fell within a range of acceptable accompaniments, which Madeline has learned through ongoing participation in her family's food consumption habits. Certainly, Madeline had little if any experience accompanying oatmeal cookies with what her parents would deem "junky" foods.

This example also reveals the dialectic between how unschooling parents place controls over their personal and environmental practices and their "trust" that such practices have been sufficiently cultivated in their children. Thus, when unschooled parents talk about "trusting" their *children* to put boundaries around interference they are indirectly referring to a trust in their (often hidden) efforts to cultivate such abilities. In other words, unschoolers' cultivation of behavioral norms or boundary-making practices in their children reveals another instance of their ongoing confidence in themselves as parents – an extension, perhaps, of their early parenting experiences.

Through routine interactions like these, unschooling parents like Eve Small do not merely leave up to 'nature' their children's ability to "tune in" to their bodies, but actively

¹¹⁵ This example also illustrates how unschoolers put forth naturalized theories of nutrition and how the body functions. I use the term "naturalized" here as unschoolers treat them as fact, yet it is unclear whether they are any more "true" or "natural" than any other scientific hypothesis. For instance, neither Eve nor science knows for sure what the outcome of eating a bolus of carbohydrates at once is, with or without a protein accompaniment? American lockstep with regard to diet/nutrition beliefs du jour (even within subcultures such as unschoolers) is very interesting in light of the wide variation of healthy diets, which exist globally. This further illustrates how "expertise" and authoritative knowledge are themselves consumed by unschooling parents.

habituate their children into these practices. Moreover, in doing so, they are also deliberately socializing their children into making choices, albeit parentally preferred choices, which they feel provide “natural” or logical feedback about consequences. This fits into the wider set of decision-making practices that unschoolers seek to cultivate in their children, to which I now turn my attention.

Reading the Labels: Cultivating the Habits of Critical Consumption

In addition to habituating children into the habits of “tuning in” to their bodies, unschooled parents also attempt to cultivate in their children the habits of careful or critical consumption (in this case food consumption); they teach them, literally and figuratively to “read the labels.” Wendi Brice illustrated these practices when she described her youngest daughter, Chloe’s early shopping experiences at the age of four years:

We rarely go to the supermarket, I like produce stands and farmers’ markets better. But the grocery store is a fact of life. When we go we usually stick around the perimeter, where you at least stand a chance of encountering foods w/an expiration date [laughs]! But one day I had to go into the actual aisles...and...we had to pass this row of snack foods marketed to kids. Chloe was really interested in these “fruit snacks” (signals quotation marks with her hands) with pictures of Sesame Street characters. I didn’t want to give her a flat out “No!” –that would feel so arbitrary and all about me. I was pretty annoyed with the manufacturers for putting me on the spot, so I figured I’d let her get mad at them. So I said, “Hmm....let’s see what’s inside,” and started to read the ingredients list to her. And sometimes, you never know, [the ingredients are] not that bad. Chloe knew the names of the ingredients

we typically avoid, so she would stop me before I could get the words “hydrogenated oils” or “F.D. number...” out. [laughs]. Of course, she ask[ed] me to read the next box and the box after that. So I figured that I’ll read every label in the supermarket if I have to!

Wendi went on to explain that Chloe eventually wondered aloud why the Sesame Street character “Elmo” would put such bad ingredients into his fruit gems. She added:

So our trip to the market became this little lesson in mass-marketing techniques....I also got to get some digs into commercial TV, which PBS is, really, when you look at their sponsorship. And Chloe got one more reason why we don’t watch much TV. [see below].

In this example, Wendi indicates a number of protective practices through which she limits her children’s exposure to undesirable items.

First, to protect her family from junk food, Wendi makes infrequent trips to the grocery store, favoring instead a local produce stand. She also keeps close to the perimeter of the market, a strategy designed to keep close to where she perceives the food to be of better quality. In typical unschooling fashion, Wendi uses the occasion of grocery trips to socialize her daughter into her family’s consumer habits and preferences. She takes her daughter’s request seriously by reading the label of every box. Wendi also models how to scrutinize a given item, by literally and figuratively reading the labels. She also takes Chloe’s question about Elmo as an opportunity to engage in what is likely an ongoing conversation in her family about the workings of mass marketing.

Activities like Wendi and Chloe’s shopping venture characterize the ‘real world’ learning that unschoolers often feel arises out of everyday life in general and consumer

encounters specifically. For unschoolers feel that such occasions provide instances that habituate their children into habits of “critical” thinking skills, which many unschoolers, including Wendi and her husband, Scott Mackler, hold as essential educative principles of their wider practices. This example of consumption habits thus illustrates how unschoolers’ seek to cultivate in their children the habits of questioning received wisdom.

To return to this example, in focusing on the ingredients, Wendi offers a typical unschooling approach to parental authority as she explains that an ‘arbitrary no,’ might make the encounter ‘all about’ her authority as a parent. This mirrors Eve Small’s decision-making process with Madeline, above. Wendi draws upon a logic typical among unschoolers when she tries to cultivate Chloe’s sense of herself as a locus of control and decision-making. Yet, like Eve and other unschoolers, Wendi feels confident that she can rely upon Chloe’s habituation into her family’s tastes and rules. In this instance, the Mackler-Brice household treats certain food items such, as additives and dyes as profane (Douglas 1966 [2002]). Like many unschooling parents, Wendi thus directs her child’s attention towards the ‘ingredients’ of a given set of choices. In this way, like other unschoolers, she de-centers the parental role as a source of authority.

However, such efforts can obscure the additional expenditures of time and effort that it takes to cultivate such habits. Wendy, for example downplays how long it might take to read ‘all the labels’ to her child. In so doing, she, like other unschoolers, obscures the importance of her own time in favor of what she perceives of as an important learning experience and a general approach to decision-making in her family. Like other unschoolers, she typically draws upon what they see as the perceived benefits of consumption habits as a justification for their efforts.

This is not to suggest that unschoolers never recognize that their practices come at a cost of parental (often maternal) time and effort. As Jill Peters once explained:

Sure, things would go so much faster when you're okay with saying 'because I said so,' when your kid asks why they can't have or do something. But then you're stuck with those kinds of kids who take an "I said so" at face value.

Unschooling parents like Jill seek to cultivate children who do not take authority at face value. They see the expenditure of considerable parental time and effort as overshadowed by the outcome, which they perceive as children who can "read" themselves and "the labels," and hence trust themselves as a locus of authority.

Home-Made, Home-Grown And Domestic Divas: Cultivating Boundaries To "Mass" Consumption

As consumers, unschoolers often valorize home-based or small-scaled production. They often express a preference for what many describe as "home-grown" or "homemade." This set of consumption ideals sometimes centers around foodstuffs, but often extends beyond food. This explains why many unschoolers refer to their children as "home-grown," a contrast to the mass-produced variety of childrearing that they equate with schooling. I encountered numerous instances in which unschoolers equated goodness with things domestic and near to home.

This equation came into high relief when my daughter, Ella, then three, fell and skinned her knee at a park when playing with eight year-old Jessica and four year-old Bobbie Lowry-Jenkins. With no bandages in sight, their mother, Dina Lowry, rigged what she called a "home-made band-aid" using paper towels and stickers. As Ella selected stickers from

Dina's "bag of fun from home" (a back pack filled with snacks and craft items that she often toted), Dina talked about the virtues of "home-spun ingenuity." She recounted a recent conversation with her daughter, which took place as they were making bread. Jessica had asked her, "Mama why are home-made things so much better?" to which Dina reported responding, "It must be all that love [that goes into home-made things]." This exchange indexed a frequency of unschooling talk that equates "home-made" with "goodness." It also reveals how through such forms of talk and other practices, unschoolers cultivate in their children many of their own consumption values (what qualifies as "goodness") and preferences, in this case for the range of home-made goods, materials and solutions that, like Dina, they produce at and near home.

Notably, such preferences fit into a cultural logic that values ingenuity, personality and the idiosyncratic. While unschoolers set this logic as separate from "mainstream" American principles and practices, some others who have considered in detail "mainstream" American values set these traits as quintessentially 'American' and mainstream (c.f. Arensberg and Neihoff 1971; Hsu 1972; Spradley et al 1975; Forman 1998). Even such typologies require further complication (c.f. Kusserow's nuanced consideration of the so-called American 'trait' of independence (2004). I raise this issue here as it points to another instance in which unschoolers' countercultural principles and practices do not quite pit them against mainstream or dominant sensibilities as much as many unschoolers contend.

The unschooling penchant for home-made and home-spun creates a complicated cost-benefit calculus. For home-made foodstuffs typically cost less in money but generally require more time and labor than mass-produced items. Although I saw a range of variation among unschooling families with respect to how they divide the labor of food gathering and

preparation, such work typically remained part of a traditional gendered division of labor and for the most part fell to mothers. As Dina Lowry once indicated

I know that if I make an effort to put good stuff into my kids now, I can expect a lot of good stuff from them later.

This pattern may not necessarily distinguish unschoolers however, they also often add layers of maternalist ideology to the principles behind these practices.

The cost-benefit calculus is further complicated by the fact that in the United States the organic and other small-scale consumables that unschoolers often prefer tend to be costlier than conventional items. In this regard, unschoolers' penchant for what in the conventional economy is typically marketed and priced as elite or upscale food consumption positions such preferences and consumption practices as relatively elite. Nevertheless, not all unschoolers enjoy the type of affluence that such elite consumption would suggest. Thus, Wendi Brice, who was not alone among unschoolers in her assertion that she would rather "...feed my family good quality food than drive a good car," reflected in her statement a preference and a sense of consumption priorities that she sees as running counter to conventional logic.

Unschoolers often draw upon educational and social capital to support their preferences for small-scale production in political or economic terms. In this regard, unschoolers reflected a range of perspectives and modes of articulating their food consumption practices vis-à-vis the wider political economy. For example, many parents used the language of "choice" and "priorities," to distinguish their food consumption practices from what they perceived as those of mainstream consumers. They often did so in a manner that did not account for their own, relatively privileged economic positions. Yet,

others, like Wendi Brice, were quick to articulate a critical perspective on food distribution in the United States. Wendi, once explained:

We may not be the richest family on the block, but we can make these choices and that's not the case for everyone. Some families in this country don't even have access to fresh fruits and vegetables or to unprocessed foods. It's a shame because families just trying to scrape by are often the most nutritionally compromised and the WIC programs don't always support great nutrition.

In this regard, Wendi was among a handful of unschoolers that I encountered who focused on her own family's position with respect to socioeconomic inequalities in her society.

Thus, in a number of venues in my research, from peoples' kitchens to unschooling play-groups, I encountered emerging expert and critical discourses, with various levels of sophistication, regarding the workings of American agri-business, school lunch programs, food manufacturers associations, etc. In these settings, parents exchanged citations for books and studies and cultivated new knowledges and critical dispositions about the social, political and economic dimensions of food production, safety, and distribution in the U.S. This suggests another dimension of unschooling experience through which parents drew on their educational and sometimes social capital to develop and share countercultural and critical perspectives as well as produce and assess expertise.

To further attenuate some of the economic costs of their own food choices, many unschoolers acquire and produce their foodstuffs through a range of practices that reflect their economic and temporal resources and priorities. For example, I encountered a number of unschoolers who participate in a quasi-alternative food economy of co-operatives. These included farm co-ops for produce and animal products or dry goods co-ops and collectives.

Many unschoolers acquire their consumables from multiple sources. Recall, for example how Jill Peters trekked to two different supermarkets in an effort to acquire the foods that she felt her family required and to save money. Reflecting overlaps with other countercultural movements such as the “voluntary simplicity”¹¹⁶ movement, many unschoolers engaged in a range of money-saving practices, often known as “tight-wadding,” which typically require an extensive outlay of time. This was certainly a preoccupation of many unschoolers. For example, I encountered a number of people in my study who treated Amy Dacyczyn’s *The Complete Tightwad Gazette* (1998) as a “bible in home economics.” In addition, “Homeschooling on a Shoestring” which offered money saving strategies for homeschoolers was one of the most popular sessions of the *GWS* 25th Anniversary Conference that I attended in 1997. Topics around unschooling and home economics seem persistently popular in the unschooling public sphere.

In addition, many unschoolers grow their own produce, make their own baked goods, and generally favor home-made foodstuffs over store-bought products as efforts to cut costs and ensure the qualities of foodstuffs that they value. Although some of these consumer practices save money, they are nevertheless time consuming and often require intense domestic labor, which in the case of most of the unschoolers that I encountered, meant maternal labor. Yet, these facets of unschooling domestic life set up a tension for some unschooling women, particularly those who identify themselves as feminists.

Unschooling mothers expressed a range of responses to the somewhat obvious expenditures in time and/or maternal efforts to sustain their consumer preferences. For example, some mothers, like Jill Peters, a self-described feminist (who dedicated her life’s work toward maternal wellness and “ensuring women’s dignity in birth”), shrugged off these

¹¹⁶ See Grigsby 2004 for a considered gender, class and racial analysis of the voluntary simplicity movement.

considerations as a consequence of wider gender politics rather than of unschooling specifically. When I discussed with her Mitchell Steven's observation in his work on homeschooling movements that the valorization of children's work often hid the domestic labor of women, she responded "So, women's work not getting any notice –what's new?!" In this way, she treated Steven's observations as a comment on the inevitability of women's domestic labor as inevitable.

More often, however, mothers in my study would echo the tendency throughout the movement to elevate domestic work. Not only do they speak about domesticity in idioms of love (such as in Dina's case), they also talk about its pedagogical value to their "home-grown" kids. Consequently, many unschoolers attempt to incorporate their children in to their domestic and money-saving practices and talk about how through unschooling they are cultivating in their children, both male and female, competences in home economics that many find lacking in what they perceive as mainstream culture. As I discussed in the previous chapter, I encountered many unschoolers who arranged their homes and their lifestyles to include children in the work of home-making. With regard to food, much talk about the virtues of baking and cooking with children circulate in the unschooling public sphere. Unschoolers credit such activities with both familial and educational virtues that range from wholesomeness and zen practices to the hands-on introduction of concrete math, chemistry and home economic skills.

This tension was further evidenced over the course of an interview I conducted with popular unschooling author and speaker Nancy Wallace, whose writings about unschooling children's "work" began in the early 1980s . In the course of five minutes Nancy hugged me approvingly when I mentioned that I had recently started to pack lunches for my husband

and myself rather than continue to buy meals from food trucks. Yet, on the heels of those comments, Nancy expressed worry over the news of the recent marriage of the 18-year-old daughter of unschooling community leaders from Maryland. “After all that work to raise strong girls,” Nancy continued, “I worry that they’re turning out domestic divas!”

Here, Nancy brought into relief a general tension regarding a range of feminist goals that unschooled women often articulated. On the one hand, many unschoolers perceive unschooling as a practice that helps cultivate what Nancy described “strong girls,” who can find their “own work” and retain a strong sense of themselves. Female empowerment seems to be a preoccupation for many unschoolers in both my own sample and in the texts that circulate more widely among unschoolers.

The topic was crystallized as the subject of *A Sense of Self: Listening to Homeschooled Girls* (1997) by Susannah Sheffer, then-editor of *GWS*. In the book, Sheffer draws on her experiences mentoring unschooled teenage girls (she served as a writing mentor and a facilitator for a group of teenaged girls who met regularly in Cambridge, MA) and with the unschooling movement more generally to argue a case for homeschooling (a word she uses interchangeably with unschooling) on the grounds that it empowers young women. Specifically, Sheffer responds to research that addresses particular ways that adolescence is hard on girls. Sheffer identifies specific findings from Carol Gilligan and her colleagues in the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls Development (1990; 1991; 1992) and The American Association of University Women’s reports on “How Schools Shortchange Girls” (1991, 1992). Sheffer contends, however that:

If research suggests that adolescent girls doubt themselves and do not feel identified with their own goals, then it is noteworthy that homeschooled girls express a firm

belief in themselves and act accordingly. The liberation, autonomy, and control that homeschoolers of both genders often feel shows up in starker contrast when homeschooled girls are compared with girls in school because it is the latter group that is currently being portrayed as having less of these qualities (Sheffer 1996: 7). Like Sheffer, many unschoolers articulate a perceived correlation between the principles and practices of unschooling and female empowerment. Yet, much of the valorization of ‘home’ and ‘home economics’ widespread among unschoolers, coupled with what often amounts to ‘traditional’ gender modeling that many unschoolers experience in their own home produced what Nancy found to be a greater emphasis on domesticity than she had hoped. These lived contradictions about female empowerment seemed to play out as part of the valorization of the home, through the domestic idioms of home-grown and home-made that often crop up for unschoolers.

III. Toys: Unschooled Constructions of Play

Self-direction is one of the great values of play. We all enjoy it. Children love to--need to--play. This is how they create themselves. They practice different realities in play and from them form a personality. It is easy for parents to forget the importance of simple, unstructured play because of the pressures we all feel to make sure that our children have all of the appropriate advantages.

Mothering Magazine editor and unschooler, Peggy O'Mara¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷http://www.mothering.com/guest_editors/quiet_place/101.html

If play constitutes the ‘work of childhood,’ then unschoolers’ approach to play and play-things reveals much about the workings of their countercultural sensibilities and practices regarding play’s place in childhood.

Unschoolers typically see a range of benefits to play, including, as O’Mara, above suggests “self-direction.” Many unschoolers also contended that self-directed play promotes children’s creativity, cooperation, problem-solving, and the development of “real-world,” skills. Certainly, when unschoolers valorize play as an essential dimension of childhood, they reflect a modern, Western conception of childhood as a separate, albeit socially and culturally-constructed, life stage (c.f. Aries 1962:125; Stephens 1995:5). Yet, as I have discussed, unschoolers have a counterculturally distinctive emphasis on children’s play; so much so that many use the term “work,” when they talk about children’s activities in order to call attention to the seriousness with which they accord it. In this sense, unschoolers see their approach to play as a clear boundary between themselves and the “schooled,” world.

Moreover, unschoolers often base their judgments about what constitutes appropriate play-things for children on criteria that they feel distinguish their sensibilities from what they perceive as those of the mainstream. The types of materials they include, exclude or modify in their environments reflect unschoolers’ perception of what is either nurturing or detrimental to their children’s needs for intellectual, social and/or personal growth. They often go to great, albeit tacit, lengths to incorporate their children into these preferences and practices.

Generally, unschoolers engage in two distinctive practices regarding play-things. First, unschoolers generally construct their toy consumption in conspicuously anti-consumer terms. Moreover, they often allow their children to “work” with materials in ways that they

perceive as alternative to mainstream principles and practices regarding play. Yet, paradoxically, the various routes that unschoolers take to instantiating their principles about play put them, at times, as both anti-consumers of toys and as consumers of fairly elite toy commodities. Thus, how unschoolers manage the inherent contradictions of putting into practice their principles regarding play further reveals some of the complexities at work in constructing a context for an alternative educative lifestyle. I consider this principles and practices below.

To understand more about the kinds of toys that unschoolers normatively consider valuable for children's play, I once asked Seth Novak about the criteria that he and his wife Evelyn Richards used to select materials for Open Connections (O.C.), a resource center for unschooled families. Seth explained that they prefer, but due to costs could not always acquire, toys made of natural materials. They also valued "open-ended" toys: those that can be used in many ways and with other toys for more complex play and enabled collaboration. As my questions became more detailed, Seth held up a paper towel roll.

He offered the following credo on toys as he quickly demonstrated about nine different uses for it ranging from physical (using it as a horn or a drum stick) to imaginary, (a part of a fence, a roller, an airplane, a telephone, a telescope, a tail, an antenna etc.). "You see," Seth explained, "the simpler the toy, the more complicated the play." He tossed me the paper towel roll and left me to fidget with it while he disappeared to one of the back closets of O.C. He emerged with a popular and, at the time, expensive toy from my 1980s childhood, a small electronic device called a "Speak and Spell." Seth continued to explain the "corollary to that credo is that the "smarter" or more complex the toy, the stupider or, simpler the play." He handed me the well-worn Speak and Spell. "See," he said,

whoever made this was very smart, but it didn't really give kids much room to be smart; it's what we call a dead-end toy: it has one right way to work with it. That's it. Seth explained that "this noisy piece of junk" arrived in their home one Christmas from someone "with very nice intentions," a somewhat condescending phrase that he often used to describe the "well-meaning but misguided" efforts of mainstream people and those in the education field to "try to impose learning," which Seth found coercive and ineffective. This particular "well-intentioned" person had been a relative who knew that they were homeschooling and thought that the device would help the children "learn to spell."

Yet, Seth and Evelyn's children quickly became bored with, in Seth's words, "being buzzed at and told if they were good or bad every time they did what the machine asked." He explained that as a result, they, "did what any healthy 8, 6 and 3 year-old girls would do – they took it apart and checked out the electronics inside." Seth smiled with pride as he recounted how the girls spent hours imagining the possibilities of the electronic world underneath the plastic covering: the rocket ships, cash registers, ambulances, super-fast cooking devices and super-computers that the girls designed with the electronic guts of the dissected toy.

He also conveyed a similar sense of satisfaction with Evelyn's response to a visiting colleague's mortification when he saw Claire, Amy and Leila playing with the carcass of the toy:

The guy said something like, "D'you know how much those things costs? Why would you let those kids play with it like that?" And I think it was Evelyn who said something like, "Well, looks like they turned it into a good toy!"

In his glee about his wife's equally gleeful and defiant response to the children's irreverent use of an expensive toy, Seth demonstrated one of the ways that unschoolers typically respond when they encounter mainstream attitude. That is, they often attempt to draw upon the sensibilities or logic of those who challenge them and point out, often with an attempt at humor, of how that logic holds for children's activities. For when these unschooled children took apart what was at the time a sacred object in American popular culture –an expensive toy that was marketed to have “educational” value- their parents encouraged and outwardly supported this behavior. In this way, unschoolers such as these draw a distinctive boundary around how they approach their children's activities; they support what they perceive others in the mainstream see as condemnable. In this case, the irreverent use of a given object.

With his two demonstrations, Seth conveyed a contrast between the types of play that unschoolers generally believe different materials inspire. The paper towel roll, in its “simple” construction, provided open-ended use. It enabled the person working with it to produce a range of meanings and activities of their own creation. In other words, the simple toy, unschoolers believe, encourages complex play. The speak-and-spell, in contrast, exemplified the kind of play item that unschoolers typically construe as having limited value. It had a complicated, noisy construction and was designed for a specific purpose (in this case, the rote learning of spelling principles), which unschoolers consider of limited use to the person working with it. We also see in these anecdotes the workings of unschoolers' penchant for the found or modified object.

Seth's anecdotes convey how many unschoolers feel about toys, particularly those designed with “educational” purposes. They are suspicious of toys that they view as eliminating children's creativity. Furthermore, they disparage toys that mimic the elements

of coercion that they find objectionable in the “real world” and in “schooling.” These include (generally electronic) toys that provide what Scott Mackler described as “Pavlovian feedback.” In these senses, unschoolers articulate distinctive preferences for the play items in their children’s lives. They often strive to put boundaries around items that they feel interfere with their children’s ability to determine the course of their own actions and favor those that they perceive as protecting their children’s autonomy and creativity. Moreover, they are also rather bold, if not playful, in how they construct and respond to “mainstream” toys and people who hold what they perceive to be conventional ideas about the value and treatment of toys.

Yet the details of unschoolers’ tastes in toys not only convey what they value for children’s play, but also some of the tensions between their ideals, the conditions that produce their preferences and their actual practices. For example, most of the unschooling parents who I encountered view mass-produced toys with the same disdain as they viewed mass-produced foodstuffs. Moreover, many parents, particularly those who identified unschooling with humane education held toys to a range of additional criteria. They often questioned conditions of production, environmental impact, the types of play that toys promoted (cooperative and imaginary versus competitive and/or violent for example) and whether or not the toy would likely accumulate first at home and then in landfills. They often expressed a preference for ‘real,’ homemade or ‘found’ objects as play-things for their children. Thus, many unschooling families claimed to rarely purchase new toys.

Like other unschoolers, the Mackler-Brice family, for example, encouraged their children’s access to the ‘real life’ items around the house and yard. Wendi also kept an “invention box” of discarded items, such as empty bottles, boxes, string, wads of aluminum

foil and other materials for her children to play with. Moreover, like other unschoolers, Wendi's family often accepted some hand-me-down toys from friends. Finally, in an effort to cut back on accumulation and provide their children a range of experiences, they encouraged family members to provide experiential rather than material gifts for holidays and their children's birthdays. These constructions of material and experiences for children's play were fairly low-tech and low cost and embodied many of the normative ideals of unschoolers' philosophies regarding play.

As much as unschoolers appreciate found objects, they also often express their commitments to children's emergent sense of competence by providing their children "real" tools or household items instead of "toy-like" versions of such items. They often procure (sometimes at considerable cost) tools sized or scaled for children's hands. Consequently, I would more often than not encounter a toddler in an unschooling household who used a small, but real, screw driver or wrench rather than a plastic or play version of these items.

Many unschoolers would characterize the types of play-things that they didn't like for children as a type of boundary-making practice towards others. Vanessa Fields aptly characterized her consumption preferences when she expressed a disdain for her "mainstream" neighbors' home, describing it as "...filled...wall-to-ceiling with crappy, noisy, plastic toys." For many unschoolers, "plastic" toys indexed the types of consumption that they wished to avoid: mass-produced, mass-distributed, cheaply-made products of "artificial" construction that produced environmental waste. Additionally, unschoolers often expressed a belief that toys made out of synthetic materials put children at an additional remove from the "natural" world. Moreover, many expressed a belief that "crappy, noisy, plastic toys" modeled the habits of accumulation of mass-produced items that many unschoolers wished

to avoid. Finally, Vanessa's characterization of "noisy" toys indexed a disdain that many unschoolers expressed regarding toys that require batteries.

Additionally, many parents suggested that battery-operated toys were predicated on "behavior modification" principles of rewards that they perceived as symbolic of schooling, "You know, you do the right thing and the toy lights up and tells you that you're good," explained Scott Mackler when I broached the topic. Unschoolers' general disdain for such toys took on many modes of expression. Some parents critiqued plastic toys in political economic terms: they railed against the conditions of manufacture that produce cheap toys for mass consumption. Others objected to the actual substances of production, i.e., the chemicals and petroleum products as harmful to their children. Still others expressed what they described as "environmental" concerns and fretted about the "waste" that such toys produce. Yet a general sensibility about what I might best describe as the "embodiment of artificiality" lay at the core of unschoolers' critiques of 'plastic crap.'

Just as Bourdieu characterized the embodied principles and practices of "Growing up with the feel of linoleum versus marble" under one's feet as producing a distinctive habitus among the social classes (1991), so too do unschoolers convey a concern about the embodied feel of growing up as Wendi Brice describe, with the "constant feel of plastic all around." Wendi felt that this experience, "shapes a person's understanding of who they are and the world they live in." While most unschoolers did not talk about these sensibilities in terms of habitus, many did draw upon their notions of child development to explain their understanding of the problems of embodied artificiality.

They often articulated versions of a normative discourse that circulates in the unschooling public sphere that suggest that babies and young children should interact with

“natural” materials such as wood, silks and natural fibers as part of what many perceive as a necessary process of connecting to “nature.” In this line of thinking, comfort and connection with “nature” represents a necessary stage of development of concrete thinking and relationships. Such “connections,” the logic holds, preclude a connection to the ‘abstractions’ of the ‘wider culture’ in this case the synthetic materials of industrial society (c.f. Pearce 1977). This logic holds that human beings should work materials from the “natural” world to connect with it. Further, (in contrast), that materials from the “artificial” world produce connections to the artifice of an industrialized society, identified as plastic.

Owing to this penchant for play connected to the “natural” world, unschooled children typically engage in copious amounts of outdoor play in the “natural” world, often finding play through the twigs, stones, puddles, dirt, flora and fauna that they encounter. Depending on where they live, these encounters take place in their backyards or farms or in the “nature centers” that many unschoolers frequent. On the one hand, the use of these forms of “natural” materials as play things represents a minimal economic output on the part of parents and sets unschoolers’ play as anti-consumer (barring the general fetishization of this type of activity *as* a consumer preference).

Yet, parents attempts to meet the perceived need for their children to connect with “natural” materials can come at relatively high costs. For just as organic foods tend to cost more than those grown and sold conventionally, so too, do the hand-crafted, natural fiber-based toys and play items that unschoolers tend to favor. Consequently, it was a rare unschooling household that actually had such toys, exclusively. This perhaps explains, in part, why I also saw a “bunch of plastic crap” in many unschoolers homes.

My daughter even inherited this material, in the form of a plastic kitchen set and play food that had been ‘well-loved’ by several unschooling families. When Wendi Brice dropped off the kitchen set, she talked about the hours of play that it brought first to her children and then (when they outgrew it), the Gordon children. None of these parents, who often spent time talking about the importance of children working with *real* materials, cooking *real* meals, for example, had refused their children the pretend kitchen set on the grounds that they were either plastic or that they were imitation versions of kitchens. Thus, while unschoolers value children’s work as work (i.e. cooking a real meal), they also found value in children making use of fantasy play items.

Perhaps this was the case because despite its plastic construction, the play set fit into unschoolers’ valorization of imaginative play. Even a child who often cooks real meals with her or his parents might use a plastic kitchen set to cook a pretend meal or run a pretend restaurant. This was the case for many of the unschooled children in my study. Certainly, this approach to play was not at all different from how many non-unschoolers see creative toys and imaginative play. It suggests, as well, that while unschoolers have much to say about “usefulness” and competence, they are not entirely divorced from the Western constructions of childhood as being about play and fantasy (a relatively new, western version of childhood (c.f. Aries 1962; Stephens et al 1995; Castenada 2002). In fact, unschoolers had many things to say about the role of ‘play’ as a preparation for “real life” as they construct it.

Thus, unschoolers’ consumption preferences for toys and their approaches to children’s play are somewhat less critical of materialism as they are of “synthetic” materials and experiences. In addition, in their lived practices unschoolers often strike a balance between what often amounts to rarified consumption practices and a pragmatic sensibility:

You “make” fun, you “find” it, you do “hand-me-downs,” and you critique the mindless consumption of your neighbors. Mostly, it’s about play.

IV. What No T.V.¹¹⁸ Means: Boundaries to Media Consumption

Unschoolers perceive their attitudes towards television as distinct from both Christian homeschoolers and mainstream Americans. Unschoolers often use consumption-oriented language to describe and critique television and what they perceive as its ill effects. Television, for most unschoolers, symbolizes, as Jill Peters once put it, a “Closed mouth, a still body and a passive mind.” Not surprisingly, many unschoolers draw pointed analogies between television and what they perceive as mainstream schooling. In fact, a number of unschoolers in my study connected schooling with television viewing and used phrases like “passive/captive audience,” or “spoon feeding,” to describe both television viewing and the experience of going to school.

Furthermore, unschoolers used their attitudes and habits regarding television to distinguish themselves from mainstream culture as well as from other homeschoolers, notably Christian homeschoolers. Scott Mackler once distinguished his unschooling attitude towards television from those of Christian homeschoolers in the following manner:

Our Christian homeschooling friends hate the content of commercial TV so they started their own Christian networks. It’s okay to park the kids in front of the TV all day so long as it’s *Jesus and Friends* instead of *Barney and Friends*.

¹¹⁸ Internet usage constitutes a similar, yet subtly different domain of media consumption for unschoolers. The Internet has grown exponentially since I concluded the intensive home visit part of my research, so I do not have systematic data on how much and in what ways unschoolers use the Internet. I have gathered, however, that unschoolers are generally wary of “screen time” altogether for young children; they seem to treat (and model) the use of the internet as a “tool” (which requires careful “media savvy use) for their children, rather as a form of entertainment. So while some of my discussion in this section applies to media generally, I limit it here to television viewing, videotaped and DVD recordings..

While this example reveals Scott's often thinly-veiled ire towards Christian homeschoolers, it also provides a general illustration of how unschoolers distinguish their attitudes towards television from those of Christian homeschoolers. Unschoolers see Christians as objecting to the *content* of television rather than to the consumption *processes* of television viewing. For Christians, as Scott indicates, the solution is often to create their own Christian-based institutions such as all-Christian television networks, Christian curricula and Christian-only educational collectives (see Stevens 2001). Unschoolers, on the other hand find themselves in a more critique-driven and complicated relationship with consumables such as television. They often revile television but see it as an uneasy fact of life.

People from many sectors of American society critique extensive television use for reasons that range from concerns about physical and mental health, apathy, violence, discrimination, exploitation, commercialization, concerns about increasing media consolidation, "morality" and the related evisceration of a free press in a democratic society.¹¹⁹ Unschoolers share many of these concerns and often draw upon additional logics, such as various theories of development, to underpin their critiques of television consumption. Moreover, they engage in a range of counterculturally distinct practices to attenuate their children's television consumption.

As we shall see, a range of unschooling principles and practices, some of them contradictory, guide their consumption practices regarding television. For example the unschooling principles of "trusting" children sometimes comes in to play, while other situations require intense parental labor to regulate television consumption. Unschoolers seek to create boundaries in ways that range from disallowing television to cultivating in their

¹¹⁹For example, tvturnoff.org, a national organization dedicated to reducing television consumption, provides research, resources and programs to encourage people to reduce and/or eliminate television consumption. (www.tvturnoff.org).

children the habits of what parents perceive as careful media consumption. Finally, as is the case with other dimensions of unschooling life, when parents do engage in what they construe as mainstream practices, in this case of television watching, they go to considerable lengths to justify their practices, further underscoring the countercultural normativity of eschewing television.

Unschoolers voice many critiques of television and set up a normative view of television consumption as disdainful. In fact, the unschooling public sphere circulates discourses that both equate television with schooling and idealize “T.V.-free,” families. In my own research, I encountered few such idealized families. Instead, parents often would mark themselves as unschoolers by describing their families as “not big on television,” to distinguish themselves from mainstream families. Yet, the unschooling principle of “trusting” children to self-regulate creates a philosophical collision with assumptions about television as inherently addictive. Consequently, many unschoolers locate themselves along a continuum of media-consumption that ranges from “media-phobia” on one extreme to “laissez-faire,” consumers of television on the other end.

While unschoolers generally eschew television, I nevertheless encountered only one unschooling family that did not own a television set. This situation mirrored unschoolers approach to plastic toys: while normatively stigmatized, plastic toys were still a fact of life as part of the range of unschoolers’ lived consumer practices. To attenuate an uneasy relationship with television, unschoolers engaged in a range of practices that I explore below. For example, most families not only had TVs but also VCRs, which provided them a sense of control over their family’s viewing experiences; some even subscribed to cable.

Still, disdain for television was a normative consumer preference among unschoolers. They cited a range of reasons. Chief among these was a concern that television watching is a form of passive consumption of images and ideas. For most unschoolers, the “passive” element of television viewing, what Jill Peters above described as a “closed mouth, a still body and a passive mind,” formed the most egregious elements of TV viewing. For television viewing is antithetical to unschoolers deeply-held assumptions about children’s learning as a process that takes place through activity. Time spent in front of the “idiot box,” as many unschoolers call the TV¹²⁰, is time spent *not* learning by doing. Some unschoolers had elaborate theories of child or brain development to map onto their critiques.

Jill Peters, for example, once described using the television as a “babysitter,” or form of entertainment that required minimal adult supervision, as a “quiet now, pay later,” prospect. As she explained:

I always find that if I park the kids in front of the TV, even with an educational video or something quiet, that it buys me some quiet time in the moment. They can sit there like zombies for a good while. But there’s always this payback later on. It must be all those images at once, cause it never happens if we sit quietly to read a book. [With television] they get really rammy and restless. Its like giving kids candy when they’re hungry: there’s always hell to pay later on when that blood-sugar roller-coaster kicks in.

Jill, like most unschoolers use their own experiences with television as a sufficient evidence of television as “brain candy” (as a number of unschoolers and others describe television).

Jill takes this explanation a step further when she speculates that television viewing in general

¹²⁰ Unschoolers in my study seemed suspicious of all forms of “screen time,” which include computer and video games. Nevertheless, just as their children at times watched television, so too, did they play video and computer games.

and an onslaught of imagery in particular, have ill effects on her children's basic physiology. Thus, with television viewing, as with the consumption of junk food, unschoolers perceive restlessness as a by-product. For Jill and other unschoolers like her, this causal relationship is evidenced through her children's "zombie," –like stillness while watching television and in their perceived restlessness afterwards.

As we considered in the previous chapter, unschoolers typically perceive that their children's general activities fluctuate between movement and stillness but rarely produce restlessness. Thus, according to a countercultural logic, restlessness is a problem of imbalance. A number of unschooling informants bandied different theories of brain development or pop psychology to explain their objections to the basically passive consumption of television viewing. In this sense, many unschoolers equated the cycle of zombie-like stillness followed by restlessness of television viewing to schooling. For many unschoolers viewed schooling as a process through which children were, in unschooling mother Dina Lowry's terms, "expected to sit still like zombies until recess time."

In addition to suspicions about the processes of television viewing, unschoolers critique television for other reasons. Many tend to approach commercial television in particular with suspicion. They often described such programming as of low quality and inviting further consumption by way of advertised products. As Rachel Berger once lamented:

I'm no big fan of most TV shows, but it's more the commercials that get to me. We're not really big on buying things around here and when [the kids] watch TV they're just bombarded with these ads to buy things: noisy toys and junky food; none of the stuff that I really want in this house. So I just feel the TV, well at least

commercial TV, invites noise and strife into my home. I guess that's why I have a higher tolerance for videos from the library. Then it's up to the kids to argue over what to watch! [laughs]

Rachel, like many unschoolers, feels that commercial television invites unwanted commercial advertising into her home. She feels that TV adds undermine her sense of her home as a place of minimal consumption and invite "noise" and "strife" into her household. While other unschoolers may not see themselves as consumer minimalists to the extent of Rachel's family, they nevertheless often expressed a sense that advertisements encroach upon the types of consumption boundaries that they sought to create around their homes.

Some unschoolers were even critical of the corporate sponsorship of public television, which they often viewed as veiled advertising. Scott Mackler captured this sentiment when he explained,

Sesame Street isn't all that innocuous, you know. They don't come right out and say that [characters such as] Elmo and Cookie Monster drink Juicy Juice or go to Chuckie Cheese, but they may as well.

While Scott lent one of the more vociferous voices of opposition to television that I encountered, many unschoolers shared in this suspicion of commercial and even public television. Like Rachel, above, they typically expressed a preference for videos or even videotaped programming, which they felt lent them more control. For videos provide greater control over what their children viewed, the timing and duration of television viewing and an opportunity to keep advertisers at bay.

Yet, as I indicated above and explore below, television viewing is no simple matter for unschoolers. For although unschoolers may idealize a "TV-free" life, they are

nevertheless consumers, albeit critical consumers, of television media. Unschoolers experiences with television reveal how they navigate some of the lived tensions between an unschooling ethos of “trusting children” and the realities that television brings with it the encroachment of the wider world. Unschoolers have a range of ways of dealing with the tensions accorded by television consumption and their beliefs about children. Below I explore some of the lived details of this uneasy relationship.

What “T.V. Free” Means In Lived Practice.

How unschoolers approach television consumption offers a window into how unschoolers navigate some of the challenges that unschooling principles pose. Specifically, the normativity of eschewing television pits unschoolers’ principle of trusting children to direct their work and their time against a practice that often engenders strong parental feelings about what they perceive as a powerful and disdainful medium.

Thus, I encountered relatively few parents who relied entirely upon the child-directed ethos of unschooling to “trust” their young children to self- regulate consumption of media. I did encounter a very small number of unschoolers, particularly those of older children, who allowed their children to take the lead in television viewing. A number of parents also allowed their children a “blitz’ approach, such as the Small’s “TV-Blitz” experiment with Madeline. The Smalls had always had a “jaundiced eye” for television, according to Mike, but they were not a “TV-free” family. As Mike explains:

This crept up on us and after a while, we found ourselves arguing with Madeline over the TV. We had too much TV and way too many arguments. It was stressful and not really in keeping with how we do things in our family.

In an effort to avoid strife over the medium, Mike and Eve agreed to a one-month experiment. They gave Maddie free reign to watch as many videos (pre-selected with parental approval) as she wished. According to Eve the experiment succeeded:

Maddie went to town. She had about two weeks there where she was a total idiot. She even canceled play dates [so she could watch television]. And then, after 16 days of the experiment, she just stopped turning it on. Now she can basically take it or leave it.

For Eve and Mike, Maddie's ability to "take or leave" the television served as a marker of unschooling success. Eve actually later suggested that the experiment revealed (rather than produced) Maddie's abilities to relate to television in this way. When I asked when and whether Eve and Mike would have intervened, Eve explained that Mike had been somewhat reluctant, "less trusting," in Eve's words. She had pointed out to her husband, however, that Maddie knew that the experiment was for a month, after which they would have returned to their original approach to television, a "basically rare and certainly scheduled occurrence," in Eve's estimation.

Notably, the Smalls put some limits, both temporal and in terms of the content of the interference, upon this experiment, which solidified their unschooling faith in their child's abilities to self-regulate (within a "rich" foraging environment) how she responds to what many consider addictive influences that undermine what they see as "healthy" growth. Notably, in something of what appears to be a common gender divide among unschoolers, Eve, the mother in the pair, began with "more trust," in her daughter's abilities to self-regulate, while Mike was originally more skeptical. Perhaps for this reason, as well as for a strong mistrust of television as a powerful influence, Eve and Mike did not fully relinquish

control over the process: they provided a time-frame to the “experiment” and designated the type of programming that their daughter could watch.

The TV-blitz approach represents an extreme in the range of unschooling television practices I encountered. Some families set limits on the amount of time that their children can watch television over the course of a day or a week. Rachel Berger and Irving Tobin, for example provide their children four “media cards,” apiece per week. The children can redeem the cards to initiate a thirty-minute segment of television or (in the case of the older children) video games. In an effort to foster cooperation and accord their children a sense of control over their media consumption, Rachel and Irving allow the children to shared and trade the cards with each other. Many other unschooling families engaged in similar practices to set limits on viewing time.

Most unschooling families set careful and critical television consumption as a long-term goal for their children. In order to cultivate such habits, these families typically watch television together particularly when their children are younger. Parents with older children generally count on years of enculturation into the family’s mores around television and into the unschooling practices of trusting children. Thus, they often allow older children and teen-agers to self-regulate their television usage.

The movement’s normativity of treating television usage with disdain is revealed through the ways in which parents often offer explanations for *why* they “parked” their children in front of the television. For example, Dina Lowry spoke with considerable regret about how during her father’s protracted death she parked Bobby, her youngest child, a toddler at the time, in front of the television. Her next comment further reinforced the normativity among unschoolers of treating television with disdain. Dina claimed that Bobby

had a shorter attention span than his two elder sisters, who had “completely TV-free,” childhoods. She attributed this difference in attention spans to her children’s different experiences with television.

In a similar way, when Jill Peters talked about how she manages some of her work obligations she joked that, “Sometimes I’m the bad mother who parks her kids in front of videos so that she can do some paperwork.” The normativity of constructing television viewing as bad practice and those who rely upon it as “bad mothers” emerged even more pointedly after these self-effacing comments. Jill added a considered explanation of the quality of programming during such “parking” events. She made it a point to say that she puts on a “Kids yoga” video or something taped from the Discovery Channel,” to indicate that the programs were of a particular quality and without commercial tie-ins. Moreover, here we see how unschooling parents sometimes do direct their children’s activities.

Finally, unschoolers relate their television consumption practices to their general efforts to preserve and protect what they perceive as their children’s natural curiosities and intellectual development. Aware of these connections, grown-up unschoolers sometimes use the notion of television to explain their educational experiences. Alexander Mackler, for example, entitled his college essay, “How My Mom’s Being A Media Nazi Got Me Into Theoretical Mathematics.”¹²¹ In the essay, Alexander recalls that at age nine, his parents insisted that he postpone viewing the *Star Wars* movies. Alexander’s father, Scott and his mother Wendi, (who once told me that she viewed it as her “job as a parent to pre-screen whatever [her children] wanted to watch”) felt that the movie version of the story would be

¹²¹Alexander shared this essay with me in an informal coaching session at his home (February 4, 2005). He and his parents knew that I had an interest in learning how unschoolers articulate their experiences for admissions committees. At the same time having trained and worked part time as a college essay coach, I used this experience as an opportunity to provide a form of thanks to the Mackler-Brice family, which they perceived as valuable.

“overwhelming.” Wendi promised to instead read to her son every book in the series. From there, Alexander developed a passion for the science-fiction/fantasy genre, particularly stories set in space. His reading ventures eventually sparked an interest in theories of space travel and theoretical mathematics. Alexander concludes his essay by echoing the television maxims of many unschoolers, (particularly his parents). He contends that had he simply watched the movies, his imagination might not have been captivated in the same deep and sustained manner.

Alexander’s anecdote and the conclusions that he draws from it reflect a number of unschooling themes regarding both television and children’s enculturation into their parents’ consumption habits. The story reflects unschoolers’ penchant for books over television. It also captures a trope that circulates among unschoolers about how allowing a child to follow a particular set of interest leads to unexpected ventures in learning. Unschoolers like Alexander grow up with continual exposure to this theme. Consequently, he perceives this journey as facilitated by his parents’ preference for the literary over the audio-visual routes to these so-called “adventures,” in learning. This anecdote also reveals considerable, if downplayed, maternal labor: Wendi not only sees it as her work to pre-view what her children might watch, she also makes herself always available to read to them.

Notably, like other unschoolers, Wendi and Scott are not just censoring (being media Nazis), but are creating alternative choices, experiences and activities. For just as in the contexts of unschoolers homes, in which they create environments in space and time that sets the context for children to make “choices,” in setting limits on their children’s media exposure and encouraging them to read widely, these unschoolers redirect and actively support behaviors in their children which they valorize.

In the final words of the essay, Alexander seeks to distinguish unschooling from other types of homeschooling in ways that bear significance for our understanding of unschoolers' efforts to cultivate in their children the types of habits that they believe will prepare them for engagement in the wider world. Alexander notes that while his parents may have "sheltered" him from this major process of consumption of popular culture, they "went a little overboard," in ensuring that he was not sheltered from "the world." Like many other unschoolers, Scott and Wendi put few restrictions on what their children read. They exemplify a countercultural principle of exposing children to the "real world,"¹²² as they construct it, rather than "sheltering" them from it.

This example shows how, over time, unschoolers develop confidence in their cultivation practices. Wendi and Scott feel comfortable that their careful, if intensive, cultivation of their children's media and reading habits have produced media-savvy offspring. In going "overboard," they allowed their children access to a wide range of content in what they read and demonstrated their trust in their children's ability to carefully consume reading, and eventually, television content. Unschoolers like the Mackler-Brices place a great premium on exposure through books over television. For unschooling parents such as the Mackler-Brices feel that their parenting practices have helped preserve their children's instincts about propriety, which will help their children navigate the content of media and books that they will encounter moving forward.

Alexander's efforts to distinguish his experiences from other homeschoolers exemplifies the ways that unschoolers see marked distinctions between themselves and other homeschoolers, particularly evangelicals, whom they perceive as fearful of the possibilities

¹²² In this way, unschoolers see themselves as distinct from fundamentalist Christian homeschoolers because they feel it is important to expose their children to what they perceive of as the realities of life. In this regard, many unschoolers describe themselves as distinctly anti-censorship.

that media might interfere with the specific messages and moral values that they wish to impart to their children. Unschoolers, as we have seen, often describe themselves as protecting their children from the “interference” that they believe visually-oriented media produce in their children’s intellectual development. In other words, unschoolers construct their boundary-making practices around a theory of preserving and protecting learning. Yet, as I have sought to show above, they share with evangelicals a notion of “protection” at work in these boundary-making processes.

As I have shown, unschoolers critique television for a range of reasons that resonate with their unschooling principles and their wider critiques of schooling. As we have also seen, unschoolers not only critique television, like schooling, for reasons that range from various theories of child development to concerns over consumerist practices. As Rachel Berger suggested, television poses a potential breach in the boundaries that unschoolers seek to create around their family lives. Yet, protecting these boundaries is a dicey matter, for the perceived problems of television challenge the ways that unschoolers typically seek to “trust” their children’s instincts.

I also showed how unschoolers manage this challenge to their boundaries. Unschoolers typically treat television with disdain. Yet, most nevertheless find ways to live with television and other consumables, such as junk food and plastic toys as facts of life. While over time, unschooling parents may loosen the control over television, they engage in a range of practices to control how their children experience the medium. Some, like the Smalls and the Bergers, comfortably reconcile the trade-offs of idealizing a TV-free lifestyle when their own practices include the use of the television set. Other unschoolers like Dina, Jill and Alexander, find the need to make excuses in the face of the normativity of television-

aversion. Thus, for many unschoolers, “no television” means a disdain and relatively diminished use of television and that their measured and often vocal critiques of television watching are often inculcated in their children through their various boundary-making practices.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I attended to some of unschoolers’ protective practices around three key forms of consumption. By looking at how unschoolers consume food, toys and television, I further illustrated the lifestyle dimensions of the unschooling countercultural experience. I have also used these three dimensions of consumption as a window onto the various ways that unschoolers use consumption practices to produce boundaries that they feel preserve and protect their children’s “foraging.” For just as the ‘cue’ breast feeding of attachment parenting (which I considered in chapter four), requires a willing and available mother, the “foraging” of foodstuffs is predicated not only upon the forager’s ability to tune into her/himself but also upon parental labors: the purchase and preparation of desirable foods and the construction of an environment in which children can “forage” without interference. Parents also work to inculcate their children into their food consumption preferences and their valorization of the homemade. I illustrated how preferences for what many describe as “natural” foods translate to a number of practices as parents and consumers that also inculcate in their children a wider unschooling sensibility. Whether in teaching their children to “read the labels,” or “tune in” to their bodies or to valorize “home-made,” unschoolers put much effort into instantiating these home-spun sensibilities. They do so with varying degrees of awareness of the wider socioeconomic and gender

entailments of their “choices.” Thus, I have shown a number of the food-oriented dimensions of raising “home-grown” or “free-range” unschooled children.

In a similar manner, unschoolers’ preferences and practices concerning children’s play items –favoring items that they feel help foster their children’s ability to autonomously and creatively determine the course of their own actions-- often require adult labor or material resources to accommodate refined consumer preferences. For in modern America, encouraging the growth of one’s children without “the constant feel of plastic all around,” as Wendi Brice put it, takes either extra cash or a certain degree of ingenuity. Among the forms of consumption that I have considered, the boundaries of and to consumption seem the most permeable for unschoolers when it comes to television

Many unschoolers contend that the lived boundaries to consumption will put their children in good stead as they become ready to participate in the wider culture. Thus, Alexander Brice-Mackler’s attempts to convey in his college essay that his experience of unschooling was not one of being sheltered from the world but of a carefully concerted, cultivated introduction to it. His explanation exemplifies unschoolers’ general premise that protecting their children’s “natural” development is a process that ultimately preserves their children’s ability to participate fully and responsibly in the world, as self-actualized adults. As we have seen, the development of such careful consumers takes much, often overlooked, parental and generally maternal labor.

Unschoolers seem confident that their “authentic” lifestyle that they cultivate, in part, by judicious consumer practices both eliminates the interference by teaching their children the habits of “reading the labels” and enables their children to know themselves

enough to forage so that they may competently and gradually come to know the world as they move out into it. I take up these considerations in the following chapter.

Ch 7: The “World” As One’s Classroom? : Unschooling Community-Based Education

What brought us back to our vision was an absolute commitment to taking the interests and knowledge quests of our children seriously, coupled with an acute and awkward awareness of our own limited abilities to meet their expressed needs.

David H. Albert, from *And the Skylark Sings With Me: Adventures in Homeschooling and Community-Based Education* (1999: 43)

Community-based education comprises one of the most significant and distinctive dimensions of unschoolers’ countercultural endeavors. Unschoolers typically construct as countercultural their efforts to create opportunities for their children to learn from what they perceive as “real” life in “the world.” Moreover, as David Albert suggests above, most unschoolers recognize that they cannot, on their own, meet all of their children’s expressed needs. Consequently, other people and resources gradually come to play more significant roles in their children’s unschooling experiences. For this reason, as their children grow and move into the wider world, most unschooling parents see their roles as evolving from primary caregivers, to resource brokers, to advisors. Unschoolers often claim that how their families make these transitions distinguishes their children’s educational experiences in principle and practice from mainstream schooling and curriculum-based homeschooling. In addition, many unschoolers claim that their ongoing efforts to integrate children into the goings-on of their communities create positive incremental changes with regard to age integration in community institutions.

In this chapter, I build upon the previous chapters' consideration of unschoolers' alternative lifestyle and educational practices around parenting, foraging and boundary-making to explore how unschoolers construct and enact their alternative visions of childhood and educational praxis beyond the walls of their homes. I first briefly detail what I call the village epistemology, the dimensions along which unschoolers construct as countercultural their community-based education. I then use those dimensions to consider how unschoolers interact with resources in their communities and how they render such interactions as meaningful and countercultural, particularly with respect to age-integration. Throughout, I consider some of the complications entailed in these practices as I continue to consider the often obscured "work" of various forms of capital, particularly social, educational and economic, and (often hidden) parental labor that the practices of finding and brokering community-based resources often demand.

I. The Village Epistemology: Community-Based Education As Countercultural Critique

I'm with [John] Holt, who said, "Let us escape from the 'walled garden' of 'Happy, Safe, Protected, Innocent, Childhood.'"

Bruce Maxwell, paraphrasing John Holt's *Escape From Childhood* (1974)

In what I call a village epistemology, unschoolers idealize community life through which children might live and learn in and through integration and gradual participation in the life of their local worlds. This entails an idealization of certain notions of community life and of childhood. Unschoolers often describe their efforts to integrate their children into the life of

their communities as a response to how they perceive mainstream parenting and education approach childhood. For the notion of the “walled garden” of childhood that unschooling movement guru John Holt described implies relationships and institutions that narrowly define where young people belong, with whom (and how) they can appropriately associate and what they ought to be doing. In contrast, unschoolers construct as countercultural their efforts to treat the world as their children’s classroom as they frequently characterize the pedagogy of community-based education. They do so on a number of grounds, which I consider below.

First, with respect to what they perceive as mainstream schooling and education, unschoolers typically describe the community-based dimensions of their practices as providing their children authentic or “real world” learning. In addition, many see their practices as more integrative of extended family and of different generations than conventional or school-at-home homeschooling. As well, many unschoolers emphasize that community-based learning provides their children ample opportunities to make meaningful decisions that are appropriate with their children’s development. Thus, unschoolers often contend that the conditions of community-based education provide their children greater opportunities to develop self-knowledge, facility with decision-making, and compassion than they would under other circumstances. Finally, unschoolers often claim that their very engagement in these practices have ripple effects, which they perceive as positive consequences for their communities. Before turning attention to how unschoolers engage in such practices and render them meaningful, I first consider what they typically mean by these core practices.

II. Idealizing the Village: Principles of Community-Based Education

Integration

Unschoolers often characterize the community-based aspect of unschooling as a project to integrate young people into a world that they perceive as segregated by age to the detriment of all ages but particularly to young people. As a consequence, some unschoolers construct their efforts to integrate children into the daily goings-on of their own lives and the flow of life in their communities in rather polemical terms. Thus, John Holt's notion of finding an escape from what unschoolers see as conventional notions of childhood, i.e. the "walled garden," resonates for many unschoolers. These parents see the community-based education of unschooling as an alternative possibility for age integration within communities.

Unschoolers also see pedagogical, as opposed to polemical, advantages to their efforts to integrate children into the wider worlds around them. Their notions of child development through integration in community activity typically hinge on many of the early parenting practices that I detailed in chapter four. Specifically, many unschoolers construe the practice of baby-wearing as a foundational principle of integrating children into their lifestyles. They often characterize baby-wearing as an insipient pedagogical practice that allows children a "perch" or point of integration from which to gradually participate, first peripherally then with increasing centrality, (and by extension competence) in the life around them.

In several regards, this emic or folk theory of learning bears some resemblance to the model of legitimate peripheral participation that Lave and Wenger advance in their activity-based models of learning and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). For example, unschoolers make much ado about the relationship between learning

and action, what many describe as “learning by doing.” They also often advance a notion that people’s identities as competent practitioners shift over time. Perhaps for these reasons, like Lave and Wenger, unschoolers also focus much effort and attention to apprenticeship and mentorship as valuable sites for learning. Typically, unschoolers construct this gradual integration of children into adult activities as countering what they perceive as the segregation of generations and segregation of children from “real work,” that result from mainstream, and in this sense, less integrative, parenting in the early years and schooling as childhood progresses.

Unschoolers find integration as a compelling construct of learning in many ways. In addition to citing personal experiences with children learning through integration, many find textual bases for these ideas. For example, several of the unschoolers I encountered pointed to what they construe as “natural” learning contexts, typically in non-industrialized or historicized societies in which they perceive people as learning their appointed work without direct teaching. Others are compelled by textual accounts of integrative learning. Thus a number of unschoolers I encountered cited a passage from the *Continuum Concept* in which Jean Leidloff details how a toddler Yaquanna girl begins to grind a nub of manioc with the older women and girls around her. The girl loses interest fairly quickly but repeats this activity with greater confidence many times over the weeks and months of Leidloff’s stay (1977:83). Leidloff and the many unschoolers who cite this example construe this activity as the building blocks of how children learn by participating gradually and in a low-expectation manner in the activities around them.

Many unschoolers describe mainstream parenting and education as contexts that are ambivalent, if not hostile, to such learning opportunities; they thus see their own efforts to

integrate their children into their communities and thus escape from the “walled garden” of childhood as countercultural. Moreover, they see mainstream education and culture as undermining the agency of young people and see their countercultural practices as promoting young people’s agency. I thus now turn briefly to the two dimensions of so-called mainstream childhood against which unschoolers set their practices as countercultural: where and with whom kids belong and what they ought to be doing.

Where Kids Belong and With Whom

Many unschoolers contend that mainstream culture and education often segregate or narrowly define the types of places where children belong. They often see in the proliferation of separate public (and private or commercial) spaces for children a mainstream that does not tolerate children as participating members of society. They see in spaces that range from playpens to playgrounds, to kiddie parks, to areas of restaurants and ultimately to schools, the production of an artificial and often commoditized sensibility that children have their own separate world outside of which they cannot function competently. Unschoolers distinguish their principles and practices of integrating children into daily life as countering these sensibilities.

Many unschoolers contend that mainstream culture in general and schooling in particular isolates children from the outside world. Unschoolers often construct this type of segregation as inauthentic and therefore problematic to children’s pedagogical and social development. Consequently, I heard many echoes of popular unschooling speaker John Taylor Gatto’s frequent characterization of mainstream culture and schooling as producing “extended childishness.” This reflects a common unschooling sensibility that the practices of

segregating children and treating them as target markets, which many unschoolers perceive as widespread in mainstream, commercial and schooled culture, produces in children (and in perceptions of children) an extended infantilism. To illustrate this countercultural sensibility, Diane Mirbello, a single unschooling mother of one once exclaimed, “My Job is not to raise a child. My job is to raise an adult.”

In addition, I encountered many unschoolers who contended that by separating children into age cohorts, conventional schools impose an artificial context for socialization and collegiality. These parents found these conditions problematic for a number of reasons ranging from pedagogical to social. Elyse Locke, for example, voiced a concern common among unschoolers, that children have “little to learn,” from encountering only children of the same age and stage of development as they do in conventional classrooms. Unschoolers, instead, contend that children and communities are better served through the integration of young people into the life and the people of the worlds around them. Specifically, they feel that children benefit from the experiences of interacting with people of all ages. With regard to playmates, Cindy Gordon once explained:

When people bring up questions about how our kids socialize, I think that they don’t get that they’re more likely to play with kids of different ages than school kids, who will be like, ‘I’m not gonna play with her, she’s a second grader!’ That’s what my eleven year-old niece said about our neighbor’s daughter. Homeschoolers don’t usually do that. They find playmates in a much wider age range....and they learn pretty quick that you never know what someone else knows or what you can learn from them.

Cindy's comments reflect a typical way that unschoolers respond to an oft-challenged dimension of their practices. In fact, unschoolers so frequently find themselves asked about how their children socialize with peers that they typically gloss this aspect of their unschooling as the "socialization question." Unschoolers often role their eyes or otherwise indicate that the "S-word," as many refer to the issue of socialization, presents a bothersome topic and a challenging dimension of their countercultural experience.

Many unschoolers see their entire project of unschooling as a lived critique of how mainstream parenting and education socialize children in the broad sense of socialization as a process of learning social norms. Nevertheless, when they encounter skepticism from others, they often must respond to the more immediate, typically restrictive use of the term "socialization," by which their interlocutors typically refer to sociable interactions with others of similar age cohort. In response, they typically claim that their children interact with people of a wide range of ages, including children. Some unschoolers often contend that mainstream children are "over-socialized," meaning that mainstream culture puts too much of an emphasis on children interacting with each other. Most of the unschoolers in my immediate study, however, seemed to strive for a balance between according their children opportunities to play alone or with siblings and to provide their children occasions to interact with other children. Few articulated a sense that their children did not have enough opportunities to interact with others. Thus, even in this restricted sense of sociability, unschoolers like Cindy maintain that their children have far wider opportunities to socialize than mainstream children do.

Unschoolers also maintain that their children's social lives map more closely onto the patterns of adults than those of conventional school children. Vanessa Fields once

encapsulated this contention when she asked rhetorically, “When in your life, other than in school, were most of the people you hung out with or worked with the same age as you?” Instead, unschoolers feel that community-based education provides their children opportunities to forge relationships, whether friendships, mentorships or collegial relationships based upon mutual interests. They feel that these features approximate how people in the “real” world socialize.

Unschoolers’ efforts to engage in their communities as contexts for learning also denote what they see as distinct perspectives on learners and those who would support their learning. Thus, unschoolers often talk about “learning resources” to describe people, contexts, or material that provide educative experiences. Unschoolers typically contend that any person, place, object, or experience might serve as a resource for their children. Most unschoolers believe that what constitutes a learning resource has much to do with the circumstances and with a child’s interest and engagement. Claire Novak-Richards explained how her family approached learning resources:

It’s sort of like being allowed or encouraged to learn from anything. This one time, when we were on a local T.V. program that did a segment on homeschooling, I got to spend time with the camera man and he showed me how the equipment worked and that kind of thing. I never saw the guy again, but I showed an interest in what he did and he had this obvious enthusiasm for sharing what he did with this kid who he never met before. You know, it wasn’t really planned, there was no contract or test or anything but *he* was a learning resource that I was able to access because my parents weren’t the kind to hold us back and say “Don’t bother the camera man.” Mind you, they would have been really ticked if I were making a nuisance of myself,

but why would I have been that way when I saw a chance to learn something new? Notably, Claire grew up with the notion of learning resource; she even used the term to describe her experiences. As was the case with other unschooling families, Claire's parents sought to integrate their children into the activities around them and thus promoted their children's access to learning resources in everyday life. Unschoolers contend that these processes of experiential learning take place almost daily when they expose their children to people and other resources and when they model the habits of engagement with them.

In addition, parents often contend that over the course of their children's development, they see their roles as shifting from their children's primary care-givers to what many describe as "resource brokers" and then to advisors. As the term "resource broker" suggests, many unschooling parents of older children perceive their primary task as cultivating in their children the habits of finding *for themselves* what to do.

What Kids Ought To Be Doing

"If they would just open up the prison gates...Can you imagine the power of all that youthful energy!?"

Unschooling mother and author, Nancy Wallace

Like unschooling author and popular conference speaker, Nancy Wallace, many unschoolers have great optimism in what they perceive as the un-tapped power of young people to change the world; they feel that unschooling provides opportunities for young people to see themselves as effective actors in the worlds around them. Like Wallace, many unschoolers see schools as types of prisons that systematize peoples' actions and hold captive their energies and potentials. In contrast, they feel that unschooling accords children a freedom that ultimately produces great power, particularly during adolescence.

I encountered many such examples in my research. I heard anecdotes of unschooled young people engaged in a range of bold endeavors, such as crossing the country on bicycle, building their own houses alone or with friends and engaging in a range of entrepreneurial and activist projects. In my local study, a number of families mentioned how then seventeen-year-old Emily Nippon, started the Self-Education Foundation, which funds self-teaching endeavors community and prison-based projects. Several also mentioned a group of young unschoolers in Portland who work as peace activists and teach young people how to put together conscientious objector portfolios.

Among the families that I studied in great detail, unschooled young people, particularly teenagers, engaged in a range of activities that were typically less audacious but nevertheless often suggested a deep pursuit of things that they found interesting. Their activities often involved different age cohorts. Many parents, nevertheless, pointed towards the more unusual activities of young people to illustrate a belief in the untapped power of youth activism. Perhaps this is the case because such stories buttress the critique that many unschoolers level towards what they construe as the mainstream segregation, or as one father put it “caging,” of young people.

It is perhaps for these reasons that unschoolers commonly use prison analogies when they talk about conventional schooling. For many unschoolers perceive schools as prison-like settings designed to segregate and control the unruly potential of large masses of people. As Jill Peters explained:

It's one thing to put away people who have committed a crime, but schools pre-empt all that by giving the message that you're a criminal, you know, you need to be locked up and controlled, just for being a young person. And with a big prisoner-to-jailer

population or kid-to-teacher ratio, the only way to get any kind of order is to be controlling. Prisons use the threat of violence and schools have their ways to keep everyone in line. So when people ask why we do this, I often ask them if that really the kind of mind-set you want your kid grow up with?

Whether they use prison analogies or find other ways to describe their ideas about the ills of schooling, unschoolers often contend that by segregating children, mainstream culture and schooling also narrowly define the types of things that children ought to be doing. Many unschoolers contend that in this way schooling circumscribes children's activities, and limits their affinities and capabilities.

Many unschoolers construct these phenomena as problematic in terms of the relationship between compulsion and competence. As Mike Small once explained:

It's sort of like telling someone that right now its time for science class. You will be doing science whether you're up to doing science right now or not. Never mind that right now you would rather be, really should be tinkering with a car or climbing a tree or making music, you can't do that now, you'll do that later, when maybe you wanted to or were ready to do something more science-y, like figuring out how evaporation works. But since you're there, parked in the class and they're going to grade you, you eventually need to stop looking out the window. You might either resent science, resent the trees outside the window, which you were just caught gazing at, "Stop daydreaming!," resent the very well-meaning teacher whose doing this to you. Or maybe, you start to resent yourself, you know "I'm bad or stupid or whatever, because I can't pay attention." Or, you could be the trouble-maker who sees through all of it but that [approach] invites a different bunch of

problems...The whole thing is a great way to get alienated from what interests you. Mike's elaborate image of a student compelled to participate in a science lesson when s/he would rather do something else and his speculation of the possible negative outcomes of such conditions reflects how unschoolers often describe what they see as some of the problems of compulsion of mainstream schooling. Specifically, many unschoolers contend that through schedules and curricula, schools define how children spend most of their time, to children's detriment.

In addition, many unschoolers feel that through mechanisms such as evaluation and grades, schools define what constitutes an acceptable level of engagement. Unschoolers express a belief that these mechanisms of schooling alienate people from what interests them and often undermines the sense that they can competently pursue their own interests. Unschooling parents often contend that as resource brokers working outside of the confines of a classroom and curriculum, they can enable their children to pursue what they find interesting and cultivate their talents.

Unschoolers thus claim to avoid the coercion of "subjecting" their children to specific areas of study with particular expectations. Nevertheless, they have a concept of parental influence in unschooling, known as "exposure." Parents typically describe exposure as availing children of experiences in given areas of activity, fields of knowledge, or people who can facilitate these. Unschoolers typically distinguish exposure from teaching in terms of a lower degree of formality and expectations for learner engagement. Parents typically see exposure as arising from family activities, such as regular visits to museums, concerts, writing or gardening or parental hobbies and enterprises. In this sense, exposure is a self-conscious way that unschooling parents try to inculcate their children into their own habits and tastes.

In a more restricted use, however, exposure has to do with parents introducing their children to something new in an informal manner. As unschooling mother and children's librarian Wendi Brice explained:

Of course parents are very influential but its not direct. We really saw volunteering as important so we exposed our children to our volunteer work. But for most things it's been about introducing them or exposing them to something and being *very okay* with them not taking it up.

Although Wendi sought to explain exposure as distinctive from subjecting children to an area of interest, her reading example revealed how parents at times have a deep investment, along with a shaping and influential role, in cultivating the various aspects of their children's "interests" and learning.

When I mentioned this critique, Wendi said that she agreed. She recognized that parents have a shaping influence in their children's activities and often in their tastes and preferences. She also explained that she felt that it was the parent's job to guard from "over-investing," as she put it, in the degree to which a child shares an adult's interest in an activity; this was a sentiment that many unschooling parents expressed. Wendi offered a recent example from her family life that reflects how the more restricted use of exposure that unschoolers typically employ played out:

So Scott thought that it would be cool to expose Chloe to optics and how people use them. He got a hold of some lenses and telescopes and some books on light and took Chloce with him to a star-gazers event. His basic attitude was, "If it sticks, that's great, but if not, it's no big deal." That was the extent of his investment. His approach was "Hey, here's what this is about; here are people that do it

enthusiastically. If you're up to pursuing this, we'll see what we can do." It turns out that she was just a little interested in [astronomy] but it wasn't like it lit this fire in her soul. And Scott didn't take it personally or see it as some failure. He said, "Oh, Chloe and I had a nice time and met some cool people." And that was it.

Scott continued going to the club and occasionally invited Chloe to join him. As Wendi explained, he did not take personal offense at Chloe's diminishing interest. Had Scott been over-invested in the notion of Chloe the star-gazer, he might have developed a quasi-curriculum around optics or astronomy. Here Wendi, like other unschoolers, see "over investment," as akin to developing an adult-driven agenda. Concerned that such agendas compel activity but discourage autonomy, learning, and genuine investment in cultivating one's own interests, unschoolers shy away from adult-driven agendas.

Yet, parents like Scott and Wendi see it as their job to expose or introduce their children to things and people that they feel might captivate their interests. Still, they feel as strongly about *not* being over-invested in particular outcomes of such exposures. Thus, the notion of exposure provides unschoolers an alternative framework from curriculum through which to render meaningful how they guide their children in accessing educational experiences and resources. Notably, unschooling parents make it their task to render those experiences meaningful only on rare occasions, such as when they must account for their activities to the state, a set of practices I consider in the following chapter.

"Real World" Learning

Unschoolers talk about "real" world learning as far more concrete, accessible and genuine than the types of abstractions that they impute to schooling. They often contend that

through hands-on learning, what many describe as “learning by doing,” children understand, retain, and apply what they learn more effectively than under other circumstances.

Unschoolers often inject into this schema of learning a theory of development that posits that children can manage greater abstractions over time. They typically contend that mainstream schooling imposes abstraction too early and without account for what they perceive as children’s developmental needs.

In connection to these claims, for example, unschoolers circulate many anecdotes that relate to how children indirectly learn mathematics concepts, such as fractions and percentages. Instead, unschoolers claim, their children develop mathematical understandings through direct experiences, such as baking, handling money, or music-making. Thus, just as parents often talk about “kitchen math,” at home they often tell stories about how their children handle allowance, help with purchases or run family businesses. These stories confirm for unschoolers that concrete or “real world” experiences help their children develop skills and competencies.

Yet, as unschoolers, they see multiple, and perhaps inchoate lessons arising from such real-world activities. Eve Small captured this sentiment when she explained why she and Mike provide their then-five year-old daughter Madeline what many of her neighbors would consider a hefty allowance. Maddie receives five dollars a week, a dollar for every year of age, not for chores, but for “being part of our family,” as Eve puts it. Eve explains that she sees the money not just as an “investment in math education,” but also

An investment in Maddie’s financial life. Education is part of that. Seriously. We live in a society that works on money and we want her to learn how to handle that money now. And believe me, sometimes I have to just bite my tongue and watch

her spend it on junk. She did that for a long time. But then she started to learn from those mistakes, mostly. She also learned about interest in the bank and she's developed this system for saving, spending and even giving. She takes a portion of her investment money and gives it away or buys toys and books to donate. So, so far it's working out...You just can't wait until high school accounting classes to learn about money. Not if you want your kid to grow up handling it and feeling comfortable around it.

Thus, Eve and Mike and the many unschooling parents I encountered, see allowance and the handling of money as an integral part of their children's "real life," experiences. Certainly, unschoolers do not alone among parents, particularly middle class parents, provide their children allowance. Nevertheless, unschooling parents were often preoccupied with what they perceived of as the manifold benefits to their children of early and frequent experiences handling money. In this sense, unschoolers' approach to allowance exemplified their understanding of according their children experiences in the "real world." Unschooling parents often see these types of anecdotes as evidence of the value of hands-on learning.

Moreover, many unschoolers contend that real-world learning accords their children greater opportunity to see themselves as gradual and increasingly competent participants in the life around them. They set these conditions in opposition to the future orientation and passivity that they typically ascribe to schooling. As Scott Macker explained:

So much of schooling is put up as *preparation* for "real life." It's about becoming someone some day. The message is that, "If you work really hard in school and get As then maybe you'll get to go to college and then one day you can have a real job where you may get to finally do something." Or like with small things, you know,

“Do this pretend math lesson about banking in school so that one day you might be able to manage a bank account.” I think all that looking to the future means being treated as pretty inadequate right now. It sends a message that you can’t or shouldn’t do something until they you’re certified as prepared. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t be prepared for some things...you wouldn’t want a brain surgeon who didn’t study up first... But why not just do stuff in the here and now?

In this description, Scott constructs schools in particular as places that temporalize competence. He, like other unschoolers suggests that schools temporalize and effectively undermine competence through the mechanisms of curricula and what many unschoolers perceive as divorcing children from experiences in which they can see themselves as competently engaged in activities that produce results in the present. In contrast, unschoolers seek to expose their children to what they perceive of as authentic, competence and confidence-promoting experiences. They do so with the expectation that their children will learn in a hands-on manner as they cultivate their own interests and competencies in the “real” world.

Decision Making and Responsibility

“So you’re re-learning about the gift of boredom, eh?”

Evelyn Richards, to grown unschooler Mitchell Burke, during his spring break visit from
Cornell University.

The “gift of boredom” that Evelyn Richards jokingly alluded to above serves perhaps as the flip side of the “gift of time” that unschoolers ascribe to their lifestyles (see chapter four).

Like other unschoolers, Evelyn actually had very little expectation that children will stay bored for long, for she maintained that children, like all people, seek out and can engage in activities that they find meaningful when they have good supports (both resources and others committed to helping them navigate the process). She once described boredom as an “opportunity to listen more closely,” to one’s self and one’s interests. Like other unschoolers, Evelyn contended that mainstream children have few chances to make “meaningful” decisions and learn from their consequence and are thus deprived of opportunities to find out about themselves, their interests or their abilities:

It seems like a lot of young people get out of high school or college who need to go off and

‘find’ themselves. It kind of makes you want to ask: how did they get so lost?

Evelyn actually had some clear ideas about where she saw young people “getting lost.” Like many other unschoolers, she often expressed a belief that schoolchildren lacked opportunities to make significant decisions over the conduct of their time and to make and learn from mistakes of all degrees of magnitude. “For most school kids”(which seemed to imply most middle class children), she once suggested:

...the biggest decision they get to make is which instrument or which foreign language to take –if they’re lucky enough to have those courses, that is. And that happens when? In middle school? No major consequences there –except for never finding your instrument or your language, perhaps, which could be major. So there’s just not that much opportunity to try things out and even better yet, fail a little bit, while the stakes are still low.

Like many other unschoolers, Evelyn also saw conventional schooling and by extension, mainstream childhood, as lacking occasions for children to make low-stakes decisions and low-stakes mistakes. In contrast, unschoolers see their lifestyles and educative practices as providing ample opportunities for their children to grow up with the habits of making choices and mistakes in social contexts in which they face relatively small consequences and what unschoolers perceive as offering potentially profound ‘real world’ lessons.

Like other unschoolers, Evelyn perceived mainstream schooling and parenting as over-protecting children from making many decisions, including bad decisions that offer lessons and opportunities for correction. She felt that high stakes conditions, such as after one had begun college or embarked upon a career were, “not the time to start discovering yourself, when it’s tougher to back out or improvise.” Instead, like other unschoolers, Evelyn felt that decision-making and self-knowledge were skills that can be cultivated over time. Thus, she often indicated that unschooling provided children the opportunity to learn about their personal strengths and weaknesses as well as likes and dislikes, while growing up.

In these ways, unschoolers thus construct their practices of according their children choices over their community-based endeavors as distinct and somewhat radical to mainstream educative practices. As I consider in later sections, however, they rarely take a laissez-faire approach to their children’s decision making. Instead they temper their children’s agency with a range of preference-shaping practices and pragmatic considerations, which I address in the ethnographic parts of this chapter.

Ripple Effects: Incremental Changes Towards an Integrative World

Many unschoolers contend that their efforts to integrate children into the daily flows of community life produce incremental social change. For unschoolers to engage in countercultural praxis in a world they perceive as mainstream, (for example, wearing one's child to work or other settings in which children are not usually welcome), they must contend with challenges of different degrees. Their solutions and how they make sense of their actions reveal how unschoolers do not always merely "bring" their children into what they construct as the world. For they frequently try to alter such contexts to accommodate their presence as unschooling families. When such processes work out favorably for unschoolers, they often interpret the outcome as producing ripple effects or incremental changes in the community contexts in which they engage. Certainly, such instances can go poorly and also produce less desirable types of ripple effects. Perhaps owing to my informant's penchants to put forth a positive face upon their unschooling experiences, I rarely heard about such circumstances.

Unschoolers often describe ripple effects in terms of wider cultural consequences, such as increasing "child friendliness," i.e., the extent to which children experience welcome in various contexts in their communities and, by extension, the wider world. These processes emerge from a hopeful sense of possibility that things can change. However, unschoolers' expectations that community institutions can change to accommodate young people's presence also stand in a productive relationship with a sense of entitlement, often borne from the advantages of ample social, economic or educational capital. These senses of entitlement, which unschoolers often model for their children, produce and reinforce the expectation that people, institutions, or settings will accommodate one's needs. At the same

time, unschoolers sometimes encounter limits in such endeavors, which cause them occasions to alter their own tactics and lifestyles. These outcomes illustrate some of the workings of privilege in unschoolers' efforts to engage in their communities as contexts for their children's learning.

In sum, unschoolers see their community-based education as countercultural in a number of ways. They see their practices as more integrative of generations than mainstream culture and schooling. In addition, they feel community-based education challenges conventional notions of where children belong, with whom they should engage, what they ought to be doing, and the types of educative resources that they might draw upon. In addition, unschoolers contend that the community-based dimensions of their practices accord their children the opportunities for "real world" learning and decision-making. Finally, unschoolers contend that as they engage in these practices, they produce positive or ripple effects in their communities. Now that I have detailed some of the dimensions along which unschoolers construct their community-based endeavors as countercultural, we can attend to the manifold and somewhat complicated ways through which they put these ideals into practice.

III. Living In The Village: Practices Of Community-Based Education

In chapter four, I detailed unschoolers parenting principles and practices regarding baby "wearing." I showed how unschoolers treat baby-wearing as a way to gradually integrate their children into the life around them in both real and metaphoric ways. Below, I revisit this set of practices as they fit in with unschoolers' village epistemologies or their idealization of peasant village life. I offer an extended analysis of how such efforts fare over time as

unschooling children develop from infancy to teenagers and gradually make their way into their wider worlds.

I first re-consider baby-wearing as a real and metaphoric practice in which unschooling parents both idealize and attempt to realize a folk standard of integrating children into their work lives. I provide separate treatment to how unschoolers attempt to realize age integration through extended family life. In the final sections, I look at how unschoolers navigate a gradual shift in agency and “decision making” as their children mature. I consider the ways that parents enact the role of “resource brokers,” for their children’s community-based activities. Specifically, I consider the parental work entailed in networking, finding activities, mentors and opportunities in their communities. Finally, I show the myriad and sometimes-conflicting ways that parents help their older children manage “mistakes,” as they make these gradual moves into their wider communities.

From The Perch Of The Sling: Efforts To Integrate Children Into “The World.”

While many unschoolers draw from their movement’s abundant textual idealizations of peasant villages, Bruce Maxwell drew from experiences of childrearing that he had gleaned first-hand while traveling. A year-long internship in Mexico during college left him impressed with the extent to which children appeared to be “more integrated in community life than back home,” as he described the contrast to his experience of life in America. Bruce claims that when he and wife, Karin, became parents, they tried to pursue the “Mexican model” of communal care-giving as he understood it. “It seemed to me that everyone was watching out for kids, not just their parents,” Bruce explained.

Thus, Bruce and Karin sought to live out the ideal of children safely and productively included into what they construe as the grown-up world. They also held out hope that in so doing they would model these ideals for family, friends, and neighbors and thus bring about incremental change through example. Like many unschoolers, Bruce and Karin's efforts to put this ideal into practice in a suburban U.S. context were met with mixed successes. Their experiences in different settings exemplify some of the pivotal factors at play when unschoolers seek to encourage child-friendliness or the integration of children into various spaces in their communities.

Bruce's experiences bringing his young daughter with him while he met his work obligations at a local co-op illustrate a case in which an unschooler found success in an effort to impose child-friendliness in a setting that had not previously included children:

When Zoey was about four months old, I began to show up for my weekly packing duty with her asleep on me in the Snuggli. I would just wear her while I divided the big packages of foods into family-sized versions, which was the work at the time. First, I got these really funny looks from the other workers there, but nobody said anything. I just kept bringing her each week and she'd just hang out. Sometimes I wore her in a sling, or, when she got old enough, she'd sit on the floor and play with the empty packing crates. Her favorite spot was the scale, and she would spend her time just moving different containers onto it. As she got older she started to measure things and, you know, help out a bit. Nothing major, but she was never *destructive*, which is what I think people expected. Sometimes, when new people would come into the kitchen, they would ask about her, but she always just smiled and played and acted like she just belonged. Mostly, that's how they treated her in return. Once

she did fuss, because this woman just grabbed containers out of her hand and startled her--it was a little rude of the lady, if you ask me-- but other than that, it worked out great.

Bruce perceived the experience of bringing Zoey to his volunteer work as having a good result for himself, his daughter, and others at the co-op.

I think it was a great example for everyone there, that children can be seen and heard and that they don't interfere any more than adults do. The co-op management saw that well-tended children won't get hurt or damage anything and so I also think that Zoey's being there made it easier for other parents to bring in their kids. And I think it helped make the co-op a more kid-friendly place, which is good for everyone.

Bruce conceded that certain privileged conditions bolstered the child-friendly atmosphere that he felt his "well-tended" daughter helped engender. "Well, Zoey was an easy baby and it was a volunteer job; it was for only about 3 hours a week and I think that there was this novelty of me being a guy with a baby on me." He also noted that the co-op did not allow its paid workers (mostly women) to bring their children in to work. As Bruce recognized, his status as a worker (albeit a volunteer), was not diminished on account of his attempts to blend childcare obligations with work; indeed the complimentary comments of fellow co-op members such as "What a great daddy!" and "Your wife is so lucky," suggest that bringing Zoey along bolstered his identity as a worker and father. Bruce felt these double standards acutely, for they surfaced in his wife Karin's less than favorable experiences in trying to seek accommodations to parenting in her workplace.

Karin had worked as an architect in a small firm near their home. She felt fortunate that her employers provided a generous maternity leave¹²³ and a semi-private space to pump breast milk when she returned to work when Zoey was three months old. Yet, Zoey did not take to bottles reliably and Karin's employers indicated discomfort with the idea of Bruce bringing Zoey to the office to breastfeed. Consequently, Karin and Bruce decided to alter their lifestyle instead of trying to force the corporate world to accommodate their style of parenting.

Like many unschoolers I encountered, the Maxwells "took the plunge," as Karin put it, and severed traditional moorings from the corporate world. They felt empowered to do so after they took stock of their work and economic lives. Bruce had already been freelancing as a computer programmer, while Karin had been the "steady-paycheck gal." Risking group health benefits and secure income, Karin took work as a freelance consultant until the family was able to transition to a reliance on Bruce's income. Eventually, Karin, like a number of unschooling mothers, developed a small home-based business; she makes specialty candies. These financial risks also invited a scaled-back economic lifestyle. "We decided to re-prioritize and look at what we really needed," Karin explained:

It was more important for us to be around with our family and include our kids in our work around our community than it was to have two cars, new clothes or – perish the thought –take a vacation! We weren't exactly high on the hog before but like most people we could always cut a little more, so we did. We found ways to include our kids and just show people around here that kids belong in the community too.

¹²³ Karin noted that Zoey was born prior to the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 and that her small firm was not bound by its regulations. Thus, these employer-driven conditions seemed to her like generous benefits rather than protected rights.

Here Karin identifies herself with what she perceives of as “most people” indexes an economic class that can reduce its family budget. Yet, this identification itself specifies a class location and class perception not given to scarcity.

As well, like many unschoolers, Karin and Bruce based their employment “risks” and scaled-back home economics upon a relatively stable economic foundation. In the Maxwell’s case, they were buttressed by considerable safety valves, which included ample educational capital that would serve them well in the job market if the risks didn’t work out as planned. Like several of the unschooling parents in my study who had delayed childbearing until after they had established their careers, the Maxwells also had a home that had been largely paid for prior to the birth of their children. Karin and Bruce were, however, somewhat unique among the families in my study, insofar as *both* of them drew their incomes exclusively from freelance work, which also required flexible childcare. Neither actually brought their children to their consulting jobs. This condition allowed them instead to tend to their children while their spouse engaged in professional activities.

These anecdotes reveal that as much as the Maxwells sought to include their children in their work, they were both *only* successful in doing so during either non-paid *or* commercially-driven work, such as Bruce’s co-op obligations or when Karin would eventually bring her children to sales calls for the specialty candy-making business that she started as she transitioned out of architecture altogether. This pattern of integrating children into particular kinds of work seems typical among the unschoolers in my study. Nevertheless, unschoolers often touted the ease of integrating children into “adult work.” Yet this work was often restricted to volunteer work or work characterized by a high degree of flexibility.

Thus, I encountered many unschoolers who strove to incorporate their children into volunteer work. In some instances, unschoolers seamlessly integrated their children into volunteer work; other instances required negotiation with the volunteer organizations. For example, Wendi Brice asked her local chapter of Meals on Wheels (an organization which provides meals and companionship to homebound individuals) to match her with clients who enjoyed children's company. Similarly, Rachel Berger modified some of her volunteer activities so that her four sons could participate. In some instances, children's participation was presumed, such as in Rachel's work with the breastfeeding support organization, La Leche League. Other of her volunteer contexts, such as a community food pantry and a children's clothing exchange, were fairly easy to mould children's presence to the basic work. However, Rachel's longtime work with a shelter for survivors of domestic violence and their children required some re-tooling to accommodate her own children's presence. She had to forgo her counseling work and instead supervise as her sons helped out with kid-oriented activities or behind-the-scenes work of sorting donated materials. In the same way, when Cindy Gordon began to bring her daughter, Celia, to the homeless shelter where she teaches various life skills and crafts, she had to work with organizers there to find "age-appropriate" activities for Celia.

Yet, not all volunteer contexts were so easily modified to include children. Elyse Locke, for example, found it frustrating to bring her son, Noah, to volunteer literacy tutoring sessions at her local library. She put this long-standing priority on hold for a couple of years until she found another mother willing to exchange child-care hours so that she could tutor without Noah. Thus, although some volunteer organizations welcome children's presence

and whatever help they can offer, parents at times must sacrifice their preferred work to accommodate their children.

I encountered many unschoolers who sought out the types of compromises that Cindy Gordon described as “creative retooling” of the conventional relationship between institutions and patrons/volunteers. These compromises were possible when the organizations needed skilled volunteers or are willing to creatively respond. Unschoolers typically selected organizations that were rather responsive to their needs. Moreover, such interactions reflect what many have described as a (middle) class-based assumption of the mutability and responsiveness of institutions (c.f., Lareau, Kusserow). In other words, as educated, middle class people, many of the unschoolers in my study felt entitled to having civic and commercial institutions respond to their needs as patrons. For unschoolers, this pattern repeated itself across the life course; this was evidenced in their early parenting experiences, here in volunteer contexts and later, as I discuss in the following chapter, when unschoolers expect responsive negotiations with educational and governmental institutions.

Unschoolers also often enjoyed the privilege of flexible work. The unschooling families that seemed to most frequently and closely match the ideals of including children in parents’ paid work most often engaged in subsistence, commercial or service endeavors that were characterized by high degrees of flexibility. In these instances, parents had control over whether to accelerate or slow the scope of their business endeavors, pending the constraints of other dimensions of their familial and economic lives. In addition, both job descriptor Daniel Pink and Sociologist Mitchell Stevens noted a propensity among unschoolers towards small-scale business. Stevens noted a “cottage industry” of maternal and/or homeschooling-related businesses among homeschoolers and unschoolers (2001). Pink identifies

homeschoolers as being on the vanguard of home-based businesses (2001). Certainly, unschoolers are not unique among the middle class in making these (often gendered) vocational choices. Many middle-class mothers who “sequence” out of full time careers to care for their children often find supplemental income (c.f., Hochschild 1997 on sequencing). Nevertheless, I believe that unschooling parents may be distinctive in the extent to which they take pains to include their children, whenever possible, in this work.

As for maternally-related businesses, many unschooling mothers described these enterprises in generally activist, rather than commercial terms. In other words, they developed businesses around principles related to mothering. Like several unschooling mothers I encountered, Rachel Berger developed a business around what she described as “principled reasons.” She often talked about “just wanting to help people hold their babies” and developed a business of selling baby carriers from her home and through house-calls. Rachel claimed that the income from this eventually lucrative business was a secondary outcome. Rachel often provides patterns for parents who can sew but who cannot afford to purchase a carrier. This work promoted Rachel’s maternal principles of baby-wearing. Rachel also perceived of it as family-friendly work; she could conduct fittings with her children nearby.

Like other unschooling “mompreneurs,” (to borrow a phrase from Daniel Pink 2001), Rachel adjusts the scope of the business to suit her family’s need for flexibility. When family pursuits require more of her time and attention, she scales back the business. This pattern held for mothers with businesses not related to mothering. For example, Karin Maxwell took frequent hiatuses from her home-based candy-making business; Eve Small ventured into real estate investments that allowed her to bring her children to investigate

properties and Jill Peters drew upon a mix of babysitting and including her children in her work as a childbirth teacher and in cloth diaper sales. Notably, this flexible business model, typical in many of the entrepreneurial unschooling families that I encountered, rests upon an additional and reliable source of family income, such as a spouse's steady paycheck or established business.

In addition, several of the informants in my study engaged in homeschooling-related enterprises. For example, Eric Turner, a licensed and full-time schoolteacher, worked part-time as a homeschooling evaluator (see chapter seven). Both the Novak-Richards and the Mackler-Brices provided educational resources for local homeschooling families. Their children's participation, however, varied. The Novak-Richards children describe themselves as "practically growing up" at their parents' resource center. On the other hand, while Wendi Brice and Scott Mackler began to do "concept development" work groups (based on their knowledge of the "developmental" work of Piaget and his followers) with their children and their friends, they continued with this work after their children outgrew it. Wendi and Scott provide weekly tutorials for unschoolers in their home. In addition, at unschooling conventions and in the "unclassified" pages of *Growing Without Schooling* and the primarily unschooling-oriented *Home Education Magazines*, I encountered many unschooling families that provide products and services that specialized in subject-area resources. These products range from mathematics-oriented materials to those that provide materials, resources or suggested activities from areas as far reaching as folklore and non-competitive games.

In my sample, I also encountered many unschooling families engaged in enterprises oriented towards the wider public. Their businesses ranged from home-based services, such

as in-home child- or elder-care, paper routes, and retail establishments, with and without storefronts. These retail operations included a catering businesses, a canoe rental station, agricultural and craft-based endeavors and a range of small-scale commercial items. In many, though not all instances, such enterprises were backed by a steady income on the part of one parent, typically a father. In other instances, both parents (in two-parent households) would be involved in home-based businesses, which ran the gamut from mail-order businesses (including newsletters and magazines) to businesses that called for local or traveling sales. This was the case for the first unschooling family I ever encountered. They traveled for much of the year in a Winnebago, selling lamp fixtures they made in their North Carolina home. In such families, children engaged in various aspects of the work depending upon their skills and affinities.

This entrepreneurial model was not limited to two parent households; I encountered several single mothers who unschooled with their children. They found different solutions to the problem of integrating their children into their work. Of these, two mothers, a chiropractor and a test designer for an educational testing service, paid for childcare while they worked. Most single mothers, however, sought what they described as “family-friendly,” work. Elyse Locke, who for a while after her divorce struggled financially and lived with various families in her unschooling network, worked both away from and in proximity to her son, Noah. She eventually provided massages from her home while Noah entertained himself or spent time with other unschooling families. The other single-mothers had less economic security but found flexible work in which they could include their children. For example Lorna Dunlevy provided childcare in her home; while Joan Bently brought her children to the home of the elderly woman whom she cared for during the day.

These mothers also supplemented their incomes with other “child friendly” work. Joan worked in a co-op where she could bring her children along and Lorna did freelance copy-editing while her children slept. In the summer, Lorna also sold water ices while she and her nine year-old daughter attended free, outdoor concerts. By and large, these mothers saw themselves as exchanging financial gain for time spent with their children.

The degrees to which children actually engaged in their parents’ work varied across families. Thirty-two year-old Paul Barton, for example, the eldest brother in a family that I encountered only briefly, explained that growing up, he and his younger brother, Phil took on a range of responsibilities in their family’s canoe and water-tube rental-business. They sold tickets, helped customers, maintained the equipment, and eventually balanced books. Despite these active tasks, Paul recalls much of the experience in terms of play *outside of* or in addition to these obligations, “We just kind of saw it like we were spending lots of time playing by the docks.” In this sense, unschooled children who were very integrated into family work often experienced the work as peripheral or supplemental to their own activities.

Many unschooling parents construct such peripherality as one of the essential pedagogical means of enabling learning to take place. For example, when Rachel Berger goes on sales calls for her baby carrier business, she brings both her infant son to demonstrate and one of her older sons to assist in the baby’s care for periods when her clients require her focused attention. When I had a chance to observe this activity (Rachel had come to my childbirth class to discuss and demonstrate child carriers), I noticed that while 11year-old Uri joined along and assisted her at various moments, he spent much of his time there reading a comic book, taking seemingly little notice of the sales work. In other words, from Uri’s perspective, his primary activity had little to do with Rachel’s work.

Rachel saw no contradiction between Uri's activities and what I had constructed as his participation in a sales call. For she had no particular goals for Uri's experience, other than his help as necessary for her work and a "good," experience for him.

Like other unschoolers, Rachel's perspective on her son's experience has much to do with her typical reluctance to label her children's activities as having a specific pedagogical value. Rachel, like many other unschoolers, typically takes an alternative perspective on her children's learning and cedes to them the task of making meaning from most of their experiences. Rachel's accountability to state guidelines that require that she annually translate her children's activities into the language of curriculum (see chapter 7) provides the only major instance in which she sees it as her job to render her children's activities in a meaningful framework from the perspective of "education." Like other unschoolers, she is somewhat aloof to this process and explains "I can say what we did, but I'll never have a real idea of what they got out of it. It's really none of my concern."

In this sense, Rachel articulates a distinctively unschooling perspective on how children participate in family-based activities and what they gain from such participation. Unschoolers often have a range of ideas of what their children *might* "get out of," or learn from a particular experience. Recall, for example Jill Peters' perspective on "teachable moments," from chapter four. Unschoolers characteristically assert that children make of their experiences what they will and further, that they do so over time and on an emergent basis. This is what Rachel means when she says that what Uri "got out" of his experience is none of her concern.

Unschoolers pervasively circulate claims that children learn through integration into family activity. Unschoolers like Rachel and the Bartons can and often do enumerate what

they see as the merits of children spending time participating peripherally in family work. Yet they often do so either when challenged from without or when fortifying other unschoolers with the common sense of their practices, as in stories that circulate in the movement's public sphere. For example, unschooling parents often claim that children learn the nuts and bolts of running their businesses as well as a myriad of social skills. While parents often emphasized the benefits to their children and families, they typically downplayed the material dimensions of such arrangements. Namely, that even in families such as Rachel's, which did not wholly depend upon her income from her part-time business, children's participation, however peripheral, constituted an essential dimension of such work; at times it enabled unschooling to work out in many families.

Despite the pervasive ideals of integrating children into adult work, many parents face considerable challenges in their efforts to incorporate their children into certain types of work. This prompts them to arrive at different solutions, some of which do not completely integrate their children into their work. For example, Jill Peters can sell diapers from home with her children nearby but cannot teach childbirth or work as a doula (a labor support person) with her children in tow. She explained frankly:

Look, if I were a farmer, a small-scale farmer at that, I would feel more comfortable and obliged to bring my kids along. But, the reality is that I don't live in a village somewhere and when I do work that requires my focus on people, other *grownups*, I make it a point to have flexible childcare. You can be sure that they come with me to sell diapers, though. Maybe it is like in a village, you know, where kids are expected *work* once they're old enough! [laughs]

As Jill explains how her family manages work and childcare obligations, she also responds somewhat critically to normative discourses that circulate among unschoolers that trumpet the ease with which children can integrate into adult work. For when Jill invokes the analogy of the “village somewhere,” she critiques the way that many unschoolers employ simplistic or idealized (in this case idealized as “child-friendly”) constructions of non-western “others” to legitimate their practices. Jill instead distinguishes the types of work in which such analogies are plausible. Notably, Jill critiques the normative discourses of the movement that construct integration as seamless for all types of work.

Jill’s comments suggest an ironic appreciation for the some of the gaps between the normative ideals in the unschooling movement and some of the lived realities. Nevertheless, her critique stops short of going against the trend common among unschoolers of primitivizing others to legitimate her own practices. Jill first idealizes small-scale farming, then offers an additional comment about “villages where kids are expected to work.” This comment denotes the role that peasant villages and the perceived lives of children in such villages play in the unschooling imaginary. For, like many unschoolers, Jill in part romanticizes the kind of “real” work in which she perceives peasant children to engage. This idyllic notion of child labor fits into a pedagogical preference common among unschoolers for hands-on and concrete experiences over abstract ones.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, unschoolers idealize children doing “real work.” This idealization fits into a countercultural construction of childhood that critiques what many unschoolers perceive as the extended *childishness* or prolonged consumer-oriented dependence that they often associate with the mainstream. Thus, like many unschoolers, Jill describes child-labor in terms of pedagogical preferences as opposed to the material realities

that typically form the basis of such practices. In this way, she, like other unschoolers, draws upon exotic idealizations of village life to support her unschooling principles and practices.

Above I considered how unschoolers seek to integrate children into adult work of volunteering and running family businesses. I have shown that unschoolers create and otherwise promote circumstances of flexibility into their work lives in order to integrate their children into their work activities. Most unschoolers promote such circumstances by drawing upon a facility in navigating and dealing with the hierarchical structures of institutions. In these practices, they are also cultivating in their children a sense of entitlement to do so.

I also considered how, in some instances, unschoolers' work flexibility arises at the behest of a steady paycheck from one member of the family; in other cases, as with single unschooling mothers or family-run businesses, parents find ways to partially integrate their children into their work lives. I showed how unschoolers make sense of these integrative activities. From a pedagogical perspective, unless pressed to articulate what their children "get out of" a set of experiences, unschooling parents typically cede to their children the task of making meaning of their activities within and peripheral to family businesses. Moreover, even in the face of difficulties in integrating their children into family work, many unschoolers tend to idealize peasant village life from the perspective of the "real work" that they believe it accords children. Unschoolers also draw upon idealizations of peasant villages as places of seamless age integration across extended families. I consider the workings of these principles and practices of the unschooling countercultural enterprise below.

Integrating Into Extended Family Life

Many unschoolers see community-based education as a solution to what they identify as the ills of “age-segregation.” They feel that mainstream culture and schooling in particular, detrimentally separate people into age cohorts. Unschoolers claim that this practice not only undermines learning but also erodes people’s basic humanity and their sense of compassion (c.f., Albert above, Hern et al 1996; Weill 2003). Specifically, they often articulate concerns that mainstream parenting and education cut young people off from elders generally and extended family specifically. Thus, many unschoolers described their volunteer work in places like community centers, homes for the aged, and other contexts where their children could cultivate ongoing contacts with elders in their community as a remedy to these perceived ills.

In addition, unschooling parents often seek opportunities for their children to interact with extended family. They contended that the pace of life of unschooling accords their children the opportunity to develop relationships with grandparents, aunts and uncles in ways that they perceived as deeper and more complicated than their mainstream, schooled counterparts. Notably, research on American families indicates that *white* children of the *middle* classes spend considerably less time with extended family than their African American and/or working class counterparts (c.f., Kusserow dates, Lareau dates). Thus, when white, middle class unschoolers treat as alternative their practices of integrating their children into the lives of extended family they may be countering some of the mores of middle class, white families, but they are also marking off some of the racialized and class-based dimensions of their notion of the “mainstream.” This may explain, in part, why the few

working class and African American unschooling families that I encountered expended little, if any mention of this dimension of their lifestyles.

In addition, many unschoolers locate unschooling as a wider project of rethinking care-giving in all aspects of family life. For, like home birth, many unschoolers take up home death alongside homeschooling as a site of critique and de-institutionalization of care-giving (such as assisted living facilities and hospice care).¹²⁴ For example, when, after my formal research period ended I chanced upon Cindy Gordon at a local playground, she indicated that her family "...hadn't done much this past year," and were "just getting back into the swing of things." Cindy had spent a good deal of the fall helping her father as he faced death. He lived and died with Cindy's family instead of in institutional hospice care.

I encountered other unschoolers who took on this type of multi-generational care arrangement. Many unschoolers feel such arrangements eviscerate age segregation. Nevertheless, this rethinking of the contexts of care-giving ties in to a concomitant and typically feminized valorization of home life, which, as I described in previous chapters, also pervades the unschooling countercultural experience. Thus, instead of focusing on her own work, Cindy recounts the events as they affected her children's education and development. Cindy thus described her family's autumn:

There wasn't much else going on for a while, really. Celia [aged 4] began to read a little more and my kids were still busy, but our focus, at least mine anyway, was on my dad. I really wanted him to have a good death. So, I don't know what the girls got out of it. You know, they helped out a little, of course, but the lesson wasn't,

¹²⁴ See for example, Victoria Moran's book, *Shelter For the Spirit, Create Your Own Haven In a Hectic World* (1997). A popular speaker at the 1998 New Jersey Unschooler's Network Conference, Moran, who had been widowed for several years, gave the conference's key-note address, "Making Your Home a Haven For Your Heart" in which she further articulated these connections.

“here’s how you help grandpa to the toilet,’ or ‘ this is what lung tissue looks like when you cough it up,” None of that ‘real life learning’ stuff. I’m sure that they got some of that, of course, but they always do. But for me and Frank it was really about them experiencing that ‘this is what it’s like to die with dignity,’ you know, the compassion of ‘this is how we take care of each other.’... So you could say that we did a lot this fall; it depends on how you look at it.

In this example, rather than focusing on her own (likely intense) efforts, Cindy articulates a sensibility that “compassion” constitutes a more important set of lessons than the “life learning stuff,” which indexes unschoolers’ central pedagogical notion that learning arises through daily activity. Although Cindy does not discount the pedagogical dimensions of this experience, she focuses instead on the palpable but often taken-for-granted assumption among unschoolers that compassion lies at the heart of their educative praxis. Unschoolers typically presuppose, rather than discuss, compassion and humane education among the principles that they hold dear. Showing their children that they hold their elders dear reveals another dimension of the “humane” treatment many unschoolers try to impart into their practices. As I considered in chapter four, unschoolers often locate the antecedents of such assumptions in the idioms of “humane” treatment that many unschoolers ascribe to attachment parenting practices. These perspectives and practices persist throughout the unschooling experience.

Unschoolers like the Gordons thus hold out hope that when they integrate their children into some of the realities of family life and death and enact alternatives to institutional care, they help to engender, or preserve compassionate relationships at home and in their communities. Like many unschoolers, they perceive trans-generational

education as an additional virtuous dimension of community-based education.

Consequently, unschoolers often make it a point to try to include their children into the workings of the daily life of extended family members. Yet, at the same time, many unschoolers exchange stories of “the in-law problem,” a gloss that they use to describe a range of challenges that arise from the skepticism of extended family members.

Despite these sources of strife, unschoolers often pursue their commitment to trans-generational interactions even under instances in which unschooling proved a source of disagreement and/or conflict. While not all intra-family conflicts over parenting and education resolve easily or ever, many parents in my study detailed how unschooling accorded their extended family members, particularly their parents and in-laws, opportunities to spend what many described as “considerable” time with grandchildren and often promoted situations that helped settle conflicts over unschooling.

Vanessa Fields, for example, emphasized what she saw as the benefits of integrating her children into her parent’s activities over some of the conflicts that her family needed to overcome. She explained, “My kids get to grow up with their grandparents, you know, really know them, which I think is really tough in [mainstream] families, where everybody is over-scheduled.” She offered this insight as we pulled into her parents’ driveway to pick up her then-five year-old daughter, Anna, who spent the morning with her grandmother, Jean. A fiber artist, Jean dyes and paints silks, which she designs and sells as clothing and accessories. Over time, Jean has included Anna in various aspects of this work, including road-trips to craft shows. Vanessa reflected on Anna’s relationship Jean:

When they get together, it’s like they have this whole other world, which is great, because they cook and work with fabrics and patterns and god-knows what

else...They go to the garment district and my mother's vendors and who knows, really. I've learned not to ask because I think that it's really great for both of them to have this spontaneous relationship, where my mom can call her up the night before, which happened last night, to say, 'Hey, let's make a cake tomorrow and you can help me pick out some dyes before we visit Lillian [Jean's distributor] and her grandchildren before they go back to Taipei' –you know, that sort of thing.

Back in the car twenty minutes later, I admired the oblong scarf dyed in an array of purples that Anna bequeathed me during our tour of "Nana's studio." There, Anna showed me the new pallet of green and purple dyes she had helped to select that morning. Vanessa mused, "Can you tell that my mom is really enjoying herself?" To my nod, she added, "That took a while."

As evidence that her mother "came around," Vanessa explained that Jean once hid from her friends the fact that Vanessa's family homeschooled. But:

now she takes Anna around to visit with her friends, who she says always complain that they hardly ever see their grandchildren and when they do, the kids just think of them as 'givers of gifts and junk food' –that's her phrase. So I she's pretty pleased that she has a real relationship with our kids.

Vanessa smiled as she recounted this revelation. This anecdote resonates with many of the stories that unschoolers use to detail how they successfully integrate and "win-over" extended family to participation, if not full approval, of unschooling. Of course, unschooling does not always strengthen bonds across extended families and at times may estrange relatives or strain relationships. While unschoolers cited many reasons for such

difficulties, they typically emphasized how extended family members disapproved of unschooling.

Some unschoolers also indicated that their evolving perspectives on parenting, education and lifestyle caused them to re-vision the practices in their family of origin in ways that also produced challenges, if not strife, with extended family members. For example, Wendi Brice indicated that while her parents eventually came to terms with her and her husband Scott's no-television policies (which effectively excluded their family from a long-standing "cocktail and news hour"). I was also privy to several conversations in which unschooling parents described outright estrangement from extended family. They would often say things such as "we don't talk to them anymore," or "they're just not big players in our lives." In most instances, these unschooling parents framed such estrangements as examples of their own successes in producing strong nuclear families. They often used idioms of healing themselves and cutting off negative and previously strained relations. They also would often add that estrangements marked a "loss" for those in the extended family, rather than for their own (nuclear) families. In these ways, part of the countercultural identity entails a shifting relationship with familial ties.

As I have considered above, unschoolers characterize cross-generational and intra-familial interactions as one of the primary virtues of community-based education. They see trans-generational education as a basis of compassion. They also see it as an opportunity for their children to learn with and from extended family members. Yet, such practices are distributed and experienced unevenly and not without conflict. In some instances, they provide opportunities for unschoolers to incorporate family members into the principles and practices of the unschooling countercultural endeavor. In instances in which unschooling

plays a part in extended family estrangements, it buttresses unschoolers' notion of the nuclear family and countercultural identities. The range of such practices serves to fortify the importance of the wider community as a resource for unschooler's education. Parents play a pivotal role in helping their children navigate such moves outward. I consider these dimensions of community-based education below.

Palm Pilots and Calendars: Parents as Resource Brokers.

In previous chapters, I considered how unschoolers' emphasis on children's volition often obscures parental work and influence in the unschooling home. The same holds for the community-based dimensions of unschoolers' activities. Whereas parents of schoolchildren work to support their children's education within institutions and school-at-home homeschoolers work to enliven the curricula they bring into their homes, unschooling parents must seize upon community-based opportunities for their children. To do this, parents broker resources and work as social networkers on behalf of their children. Most unschoolers contend that as they engage in this work, they cultivate in their children the habits of finding and sustaining activities that they "love," in their communities. As with other dimensions of unschooling, this emphasis on children's work at times hides intensive parental labor. In this section, I consider the parental and familial work at play when unschooling parents broker educational resources within the community

Unschoolers' lifestyles accord them a flexibility to engage with community-based resources not easily availed to their school-attending counterparts. Unschoolers often take advantage of off-hours or off-season opportunities that allow them to patronize civic and commercial institutions in inexpensive and engaging ways. They go for example, to libraries,

museums, skating rinks, science centers and vacation destinations while their conventionally-schooled counterparts are in school and at work. Yet, such practices are not as idyllic as some parents purport.

For example, the Lowry-Jenkins family takes free country line dance lessons on Tuesday nights from six to nine p.m. during what many families might consider dinnertime through bedtime. Dina Lowry and her children enjoy a flexible schedule; they can afford to come home tired and sleep later the next day. On the other hand, Bob Jenkins must rise for work early. For him and other unschooling parents who work outside of the home at inflexible jobs, the opportunity to take advantage of a community based resource comes at a higher cost than for the rest of the unschooling family. Such parents must choose to either compromise their work lives, (in Bob's case, by arriving to work fatigued) or bow out of family activities during hours that their school-attending counterparts might be enjoying time with their families.

In other instances, community-based education translates to considerable commute time for unschooling parents. Suburban and rural-dwelling unschoolers often joke about the extensive mileage they typically put on their cars. The jokes surrounding "car-schooling" "miles-per-day," "using your car as your classroom," etc, indicate how the various geographic contexts in which unschoolers live shape, in part, how families experience community-based education. These jokes constitute evidence of one form of not-so-hidden, but frequently shrugged off, parental labor in unschooling. This is the case because unschooling typically amplifies whatever local challenges and opportunities families face in a given geographic context, as unschoolers typically rely on their local communities and social networks to provide some of the experiences that other families leave to the schools.

Thus Monica Tepfer, chair of the Manhattan division of New York City Home Educators' Network (NYCHEA), an organization comprised primarily of unschoolers and secular homeschoolers, explained to me the challenge and opportunities of unschooling in a city such as New York:

Well, most people's homes are pretty small; so we take for granted that homeschooling is about using all of the great resources of the city, which for us, it is...but all of those subway trips can get to be a drag after a while. Every little play-date or class or outing takes planning, so we spend a lot of time on the subway, I think more so than the [schooling] families in our building.

As Monica suggests, the community-based aspects of the unschooling family's experiences includes a considerable expenditure of commuting or carpooling time.

This might explain why most of the unschooling parents, particularly mothers, who I encountered often joked about and otherwise downplayed such expenditures of time as part of their commitments to their children's education. Nevertheless, many cited what they perceive as the flexibility of unschooling as well as the child-directed basis of the enterprises as tempering factors to what might otherwise prove "out of control driving around," as Eve Small once described her experiences in carpooling her children to various activities.

As much as Eve finds carpooling her children an odious activity, it serves among the several factors included in how she chooses among opportunities in her community, which I consider below. Notably, Eve sees this process as one in which her *daughter* makes "some serious choices." This construction emphasizes Eve's wish to cultivate 5-year-old Madeline's ability to seize upon opportunities in her community. It also hides the complex workings of parental involvement in unschooling.

Once in the late summer, Eve showed me her electronic scheduler, the “Palm Pilot,” that she “can’t do without.” The scheduler indicated the “possibilities” her family could pursue for Madeline. As I scrolled down the list, Eve briefly mentioned how much the “schlep factor,” that is the time she and her toddler Connor would have to spend in the car, plays in to her calculus of decision-making. Yet, carpooling seemed to play a diminished role in Eve’s actual planning. The Smalls evaluated opportunities in their community in a manner common to many of the unschoolers in my study:

Well, we only have so much time and so much money, so Maddie’s going to have to check some things out and see what she *really* loves. So for the next two weeks we’re going to run around and see what sticks and she’s going to have to make some serious choices.

While not all unschoolers use electronic organizers like Eve, most take stock of their family’s activities in similar ways. They research and enumerate opportunities, which they weigh against factors such as time and money, then allow their children to choose based upon these parameters and what they love or think they might love. Through these processes unschoolers provide parameters through which their children can draw upon their wider communities to cultivate their interests. They also seek to cultivate in their children the habits of evaluating and seizing upon opportunities.

Eve first called my attention to the activities that would require payment: She explained that a once-weekly arts and music program comprised of a local network of homeschoolers included “a lot of Christians, but they’re not too ‘Jesusy’ and the program’s really inexpensive.” The list also included a gymnastics class that Madeline had started in the previous spring, which was “mid-range expense, but something that she loves and this place

isn't nearly as hyped up as the last place."¹²⁵ Unschooling friends had also recommended a rehabilitation pool for private swimming lessons. Eve commented, "It's amazing what two to three one-on-one swim lessons can do instead of a summer's worth with fifteen other kids." Eve was intent that Madeline decide quickly about a math-games tutoring session at the community center as it would be "just her and Amir Berger" taking the class and she didn't want to hold the Berger family up in their plans-making. They had committed in advance to one six-week session of "Concept Development" (Piaget-inspired) activities that Scott Mackler and Wendi Brice had just started to run on a fee-for-service basis in their home. The big choice that Madeline would have to make would be whether or not to go to a local homeschooling resource center that served many area unschoolers with day-long programs. "It would be a big percentage of our time and our activities budget," Eve explained, adding that:

We think that it's this really great place with a cool parent community, you know having like-minded people all around, that kind of thing. Mike really loved it for that reason, and I don't blame him. But last year, Maddie was really ambivalent about going. The thing she loved most was sledding down the big hill. And we have a teenaged neighbor that I can pay to take her out sledding all day. So I told her that for that kind of money and time for Connor to be in the car, she had better really love it. If not, we can always try again next year.

¹²⁵ Eve had previously offered an extensive critique of the "last" gymnastics center that revealed her perspective, shared among many unschoolers, on how children should be treated in classes. Although the center had a reputation for producing well-trained and highly competitive gymnasts and although Madeline had displayed an aptitude in gymnastics, both Eve and her daughter found themselves uncomfortable with what Eve described as "coercive" motivational tactics. As an example, she explained that Madeline conveyed a story about how one of the instructors mocked a student by mimicking her imprecise movements. On another occasion, she critiqued the gym instructors for treating children like "monkeys" who required excessive praise for motivation. Similarly, other unschoolers, such as Wendi Brice, described herself as a "picky mother" who wished to observe instructors to see whether or not they interacted with her children in ways that she found acceptable.

Thus, activities that provided social networking and the companionship of like-minded families weighed heavily in how the Smalls chose their activities. Consequently, Madeline spent the first two weeks of the fall visiting these various classes and making some decisions. In the end, she opted out of the arts and crafts class with the homeschooling group, the swimming lessons and the gymnastics and into the other choices.

In addition to these paid weekly activities, Eve arranged with a number of other unschooling families a once-weekly co-opping activity that would take place in the various member homes on a rotating basis. Eve described how this group worked:

Parents can drop off their kids or stay with them, especially if they had babies and toddlers that they don't want to bustle around...The only obligation would be that whoever hosted would also commit to putting out some kind of optional activity based around the parent's talents. So like, I'd do some physics-y kind of things, somebody else who had more patience and interest in arts and crafts could put something out or set up a cooking or creative writing project or whatever. The idea would be to spread around the talent and do it in an unschooling kind of... you know... a low-key kind of way that isn't too school-ish.

After several fits and starts, Eve's co-op idea settled in to a five-family group. It reflected a networking arrangement among unschoolers that I encountered often. The group, which met Wednesday afternoons, served parents' needs to pool together resources and create opportunities for their children to socialize with children who came from what Eve described as "like-minded, like-practicing families who really get it with kids."¹²⁶ Unschooling networks and the kinds of groups that Eve tried to develop were common in the

¹²⁶ Recall from the previous chapter how Eve expressed frustration with the parents of some of Madeline's school-at-home homeschooling playmates who did *not* seem to take children's play as a serious endeavor.

metropolitan area where I conducted my research. This area had many homeschoolers in general and a significant enough population of unschoolers that they could effectively seek each other out in an effort to avoid some of the “schoolish” interactions that many found typical and unsavory among conventional homeschooling groups.

Eve’s efforts to seek out and produce *comunitas* of other unschoolers, what sociologist Alberto Melucci described as the “submerged networks” of alternative movements, seemed a common practice among unschoolers (1989,1994). While many unschoolers sought opportunities for their families to be among other unschoolers, they nevertheless considered interactions (and concomitant compromises) with non-unschooling homeschoolers a fact of their homeschooling lives. For example, Julia Lowell, a psychologist who unschooled with her two daughters, participated for several years in a number of working groups comprised primarily of school-at-home homeschoolers. Most such groups entailed tutoring in specific subjects, such as writing, foreign language, a science, or an activity oriented towards physical education. Julia found that such groups, in which facilitators had different ideas about learning, worked best with older children, who because of their maturity could make decisions regarding whether to commit to work in a given subject areas.

In addition to paid and co-operative activities, Eve blocked off several dates on her calendar for special events. The Smalls had a subscription for matinees to a regional theater and purchased with a group of homeschoolers discounted tickets for morning shows at a community performance center. Additionally, Eve planned a few trips with some other area unschooling families who also belonged to the two farm-co-ops that the Smalls patronized. They planned to visit the organic vegetable farm on “shareholder’s day,” in mid-fall and

arranged two separate trips in conjunction with the other co-op. First, to the farm from which they got their dairy and meat products and then to the apiary from which the dairy farmer got his honey. In this way, unschoolers like the Smalls engage with the small-scale businesses that often provide their preferred consumables, (which I considered in the previous chapter) as educational resources. Parents often see such encounters as valuable for whatever their children may glean from visiting or working on farms and as a means to expose their children to the production of their consumer items.

When I returned her Palm Pilot to Eve, she enumerated the list of things that her family typically does around the community in addition to these activities. Most centered around the prosaic aspects of daily life, such as errands, which unschoolers describe as the mainstay of their children's education (recall Jill Peter's discussion of "teachable moments" in chapter four). Eve also noted that they often had scheduled or impromptu play dates at homes or in parks as well as frequent visits with extended family.

In addition to prosaica, Eve listed story hour and weekly visits to their the local library, as well as frequent visits to area science museums, the zoo and a local nature center as other places that her family frequents. They often went to a watershed that runs special programs for homeschoolers on Tuesday mornings. Like other unschoolers, Eve noted that regular off-hours and typically unhurried patronage accords her family a deep familiarity with these civic institutions. She speculated that this would not be the case if, in her words, "everything was a big field trip." In this way, Eve, like many other unschoolers, perceives a distinction not only in frequency but also in intimacy between how her family and their schooled counterparts engage with civic institutions.

Although the Smalls were not unschooling on a shoestring budget (as was Eve's friend Lorna, the "veteran" unschooler who joined Eve's co-op group and served as Eve's mentor in unschooling), Eve, like many unschoolers, had nevertheless developed the habit of scouring the newspaper and local bulletin boards for free and low-cost opportunities around the community (c.f., Albert 1999; Griffith 1998). Lorna, for example, had recently introduced them to free weekly concerts at a local radio station. Like many unschoolers I encountered, Eve planned for her whole family to serve as ushers or docents when they got older. Such work entails a typical route that unschooling families such as Lorna's take to pursuing performances, cultural events, institutions and activities that otherwise come at significant costs (c.f., Albert 1999).

In the previous chapter, I considered the complex economic calculus at work in the ways that unschoolers create the home as a permeably bounded environment. The economic workings of unschoolers community-based endeavors are just as complex. Certainly, as children get older, their interests and activities get more complicated and often come at a higher cost. It could get quite expensive if parents had to pay for all these activities, some of which public schools are meant to provide in order to insure equity. Yet, some unschooling families do not have ample economic resources. Thus, unschooling families often combine a range of resources, primarily economic and social capital as well as much parental (in this case maternal) time to avail their children of various opportunities in their communities.

Moreover, they typically emphasize what they perceive of as the lowered costs to their enterprise over conventional schooling. As Eve Small put it, the "home economics" of community-based unschooling are "somewhat dicey." She elaborated:

On the one hand, people can sometimes spend loads of money on classes and events and things, which can make homeschooling pretty expensive if you don't watch out.

On the other hand we avoid a lot of hidden costs to sending your kids to school. Such hidden costs of school, according to Eve and other unschoolers that I encountered, include the costs of packing lunches, keeping up with clothing and gadget trends and the expenses of school-centered social events such as birthday parties, and field trips. Moreover, in the relatively affluent and academically competitive area where Eve and many of my informants lived, children often enroll in costly extra-curricular and para-educational activities, such as remedial and/or advanced tutoring. This trend follows what Annette Lareau and her team observed among the middle-class families in their study of how parents seek to accord their children educational advantages (2000).

Like other unschoolers, Eve maintains that her family's activities and commitments differ from the over-scheduling she attributes to schooling families. Like other unschoolers, Eve claims that Maddie's activities are her *primary* as opposed to extra-curricular activities and thus provide a different experience than they would were she a school child:

It's not like with my neighbors, where they have school and then these extra-curricular activities. For Maddie, this [set of activities] *is* the curriculum. So there's no school to work around; no homework, no tests, no pressures: just "Go to the zoo and see what happens!" or "Go flip around in a gymnastics class and hang out with the other kids." ...So, I think that unschoolers experience all that stuff very differently [from their schooled counterparts]. First, she hasn't been sitting in a desk all day, you know, needing to be good or whatever. And second, it's possibly the highlight of her day instead of one of a million things that you do on top of an

exhausting school day.

In this sense, unschoolers like Eve see their children's scheduled activities as experientially different from what they perceive as mainstream families' activities. Like many unschoolers, Eve attributes this distinction to the cadences of their lifestyle as well as what she describes as a built-in flexibility of unschooling.

Like Eve, many unschoolers characterize their community-based practices as uniquely open-ended; they feel that they can, in an ongoing manner, reflect, re-evaluate and revise their activities over time in ways that their schooled counterparts cannot. Nevertheless, these constructions reveal a fairly limited perspective of the mainstream culture to which these parents set themselves in opposition: the families that over-schedule their children's lives. According to Lareau et al (2000) and Kusserow (2004), the phenomenon of highly scheduled lives actually characterizes *middle* class Americans families rather than all families, thus delimiting a specific (middle class) "mainstream" against which unschoolers often define themselves.

Yet, unschoolers maintain that their children have greater choice and flexibility over their activities than their mainstream counterparts. Certainly unschooling parents circumscribe their children's choices. Thus, like many unschoolers, Eve emphasizes that she only presents choices to her children that she can live with. Eve claims that once she delimits the field of choices, she feels comfortable ceding to her daughter considerable decision-making in the conduct over her time. Eve and other unschoolers often concede that mainstream children often get to choose many of their extra-curricular activities. They frequently contend, however, that peer pressure and parental preferences play a greater role in shaping mainstream children's preferences than their own children's preferences. I thus

encountered many unschoolers who construct as countercultural the extent to which their children's choices are more volitional than their mainstream neighbors.

Yet, unschooling parents typically downplay the role of their own preferences and proclivities in how their children make decisions. By the time Maddie reaches a stage in her unschooling experience where she has more control over her activities, some of her tastes in activities will have been influenced by her prior experiences as well as the tastes of other family members. Thus, unschoolers' claims to children's volition might be better described as potentially shifting the locus of influence or, more accurately, avoiding a shift in the locus of influence from the family to the peer group.

As well, the unschoolers who I encountered and read about rarely provide their children free reign over all of their activities. This was especially the case for families whose older children engaged in serious pursuit of cultivated skills such as musical instruments, dance and artistic training. Such endeavors typically require extensive training and practice over time as well as the considerable outlay of time and money on the part of parents. In these instances, parents often set preconditions that reflected both an unschooling approach to agency (i.e., left the responsibility in the hands of the learner), but nonetheless provided boundaries both to their children and to instructors.

Unschooling parents, for example, were distinctively "picky," as Wendi Brice put it, about the style of instruction in their children's activities. For example, with regard to practicing musical instruments, many parents sought to eliminate any system of "coercion," i.e., rewards or punishments connected to lessons and to practicing. They often requested that their children's instructors *not* offer rewards and typically refused to either reward or nag their children to practice. Instead, for many unschoolers, practice served as a precondition

for continued lessons; they considered progress as its own reward and typically strove to impart this perspective to their children.

Moreover, in what David Albert described the “absolute commitment to taking the interests and knowledge quests of our children seriously,” (1999: 43), unschooling parents often detailed the great lengths to which they would go in an effort to pursue appropriate instructors or other resources for their children. Unschooling parents often temper this earnestness with a strong desire to impart in their children a sense of responsibility. Consequently, it is often the case that once they locate what they consider appropriate resources for their children, some unschooling parents become unyielding in their insistence that children follow through with commitments.

For example, Nancy Wallace, an unschooling author and mother of two musical prodigies, relocated her family from upstate New York to Philadelphia so that her children could study at the Curtis Institute of Music with specific instructors. When I interviewed her in Manhattan many years later, she explained, “I told them, ‘Once we do this, you’re going to have to follow your teacher’s musical instruction, however odd it seems,’ but they were game.” Nancy took this approach in other realms of study as well. When her daughter wished to take up “serious painting,” Nancy promised to drive her, in her words, “to the ends of the earth,” to study with the right teacher. However she also cautioned her daughter, “If [the teacher] tells you that you have to clean brushes for hours on end, that’s what you’ll do, because that’s what it means to be an apprentice.”

Certainly, not all unschoolers take this absolute approach to how children relate to mentors or to their activities. As I illustrated throughout this section, parents, in their roles as resource brokers help their children evaluate their opportunities on a case-by-case basis.

Furthermore, in teaching their children the habits of evaluating community-based opportunities, unschooling parents seek to cultivate in their children a sense of balance between freedom and responsibility. Unschooling parents find increasing opportunities to cultivate this balance as their children get older and begin to seek out sustained opportunities for learning in their communities. I consider this dimension of unschoolers' community-based education in the following section.

Learning to Cultivate Opportunities in the "World"

Unschooling young peoples' increased engagements in their communities provide them opportunities to explore their own interests and talents. They also provide continued opportunities to further cultivate a balance between freedom and responsibility. As I have shown throughout this study, although parents highlight their children's activities as paramount, they nevertheless play pivotal, if gradually diminishing roles in their children's educational processes. This is no less the case when unschoolers attempt to instill in their children the habits of cultivating opportunities in their communities.

In the following section, I consider a few of the dimensions through which unschooling parents accord their children increased control as they learn to navigate opportunities in their local and sometimes extra-local worlds. I consider, specifically, the ways in which unschooling parents seek to gradually shift the locus of control towards their children and in so doing, seek to cultivate in their children habits such as social networking, good employee practices and solidarity with other homeschoolers. Yet, as is the case with their other endeavors, unschooling parents rarely cede complete control to their children in their community-based affairs. Instead, the gradual shifts in agency between unschooling

parents and children come with considerable flexibility and pragmatism to particular situations. I consider these dimensions of unschoolers community-based education below.

Many parents saw a gradual shift in their roles as integral to their children's development in their own rights as navigators of community-based opportunities. As Scott Mackler once explained:

It's not like we're not *major* stakeholders in what our kids do, but over time you have to recognize that you can't be- shouldn't really- be the decision-maker. Instead you become someone to be there to reflect with them on decisions...more like an advocate or coach than the authority figure.

Like Scott, most unschooling parents contend that after years of watching their parents seek out, evaluate, and draw upon resources in their communities, their children competently follow suit. They also often contend that unschooling accords their children the time and ability to reflect upon whether (and how) their time has been well or mis-spent. Yet, the processes through which unschooling parents encourage their children to become their own resource brokers, make meaning from their choices, and advocate for themselves varies across families and in many cases, from child to child, as the following few examples from the Novak-Richards family suggest.

Evelyn Richards took considerable leadership in modeling these processes for her children. Yet, although she generally took a hands-off approach in making initial contacts, she helped her children regroup when things went awry. She perceived this approach as nurturing her children's independence. Evelyn's daughter, Claire Novak-Richards, 28, recounts experiencing these moves towards self-advocacy as a gradual process. She once joked that she couldn't recall a time when she didn't make her own haircut appointments or

her own play dates and only checked in with her parents for transportation issues. This gradual shift in agency over her own affairs came about most prominently, Claire explained, when she was about 12 and she and Evelyn began to consider both various volunteer opportunities for Claire and potential mentors for her growing interests as a writer. Claire recounted:

When it came to volunteering, Mom kind of took the lead. She took out a big piece of paper and we began to brainstorm all of the places where I already felt comfortable and then a few places that I thought would be interesting but a bit of a stretch for me. When we finally decided on the library, which had never had kids volunteer, she helped me out. She picked up the phone and arranged for a meeting with the director and we took it from there.¹²⁷

So in finding Claire's first volunteer experience, Evelyn took her daughter through what she considered the appropriate steps of imagining and acting on possibilities. In this instance, Evelyn took the parental role of agent on her daughter's behalf.

Evelyn emphasized her children's independent networking over their ability to *activate* such networks. When it came time to find then 11 year-old Claire, a writing mentor, Evelyn took her daughter through the initial steps, but stopped short of speaking on her behalf. Claire explained:

We made a list of the people whose writing I admired. We also talked about what I wanted to get out of the relationship, which helped narrow it down a bit. So I sent

¹²⁷ As things turned out, "from there" signaled a long (12 year) journey for the then-shy Claire. Her volunteer work at the reference desk eventually turned into a paid, part-time job, which she retained through college and since finding full-time work at a non-profit organization; one of her criteria in purchasing a house was walking proximity to the library.

out some letters and the first mentorship turned out catastrophic for all parties involved. I learned how important it is to make it clear exactly what I needed and expected and to find out what they expected of me. But even then she didn't try to step in to save me. She just listened. So then we thought of [Growing Without Schooling editor] Susannah (Sheffer), who we knew pretty well. Even though Mom could have easily called her up for me, she encouraged me to make the relationship about me and Susannah from the start. So I actually picked up the phone myself...And we came up with this great system for mailing my work back and forth... and the rest, as they say, is history.¹²⁸

In this instance, despite setbacks, Evelyn accorded great seriousness to Claire's independent steps in finding a suitable mentor. She served as a sounding board and availed herself emotionally when her daughter experienced a setback. Evelyn also encouraged her daughter to pick up the phone on her own behalf. Here Evelyn seemed more invested in her daughter cultivating a successful dyadic relationship with a potential mentor than in activating a social network on a child's behalf.

Certainly, many unschoolers who I encountered recount stories of how they have modeled for their children to think in terms of social networking. Dina Lowry once proudly recounted how then six year-old Ariel helped one of Dina's friends identify a good babysitter. Dina speculated that "same-aged mainstream children," who she feels are often encouraged to stay out of adult affairs, were not as "practically attuned" to similar types of relationships in their local communities. Unschoolers such as Dina frequently model social

¹²⁸ Although Claire was Susanna Sheffer's first mentee, Sheffer eventually became a writing mentor to several unschooled young people around the county, which she described in her 1992 book *Writing Because We Love to: Homeschoolers at Work*. Sheffer was not alone in developing such long-distance, mentoring relationships with unschooled young people (see also Lewellyn (1993) *Real Lives: Eleven Teenagers Who Don't Go to School*).

networking for their children. This anecdote provides an instance in which an unschooling parent sees her child indicate that she has developed these skills.

In a similar manner, Elyse Locke, proudly described her son, Noah, as a “master networker”: You should see him work this neighborhood: he’s fearless in his friendliness. When we moved here he said “Mom, now that we’re in a kid neighborhood, I wanna have some unplanned fun.” So, he got to know all the kids – sometimes he introduces them to each other and is *never* without something to do with other kids, particularly in the afternoon when schools let out. And he’s just *racked up* babysitting jobs, which is pretty nice for a boy who’s an only child. I wish that I were that brave [laughs].

In this sense, many unschoolers value their children’s ability to attune to, develop and call upon social networking skills. They attribute these practices to their unschooling lifestyles in which they expose their children to networking and the cultivation of relationships and resources in the community. While unschoolers may have ample opportunities to cultivate such skills, they may overstate the extent to which these experiences are unique to their children’s lives (c.f., Laurell, quoted in Pink 2001: 310).

With her other children, Evelyn engaged in a similar process of coaching them through finding mentoring opportunities. As with Claire, she helped the more commerce-oriented Molly enact a long-standing desire to develop a business that provided access materials to people with disabilities (with whom she had long had contact through extended family as well as long-standing volunteer work). But, when Evelyn noticed that Molly seemed bored and unsatisfied in her apprenticeship with a local business where she worked to learn the skills of running a mail-order catalogue, she saw it as her job as a parent to step

in. She first took Molly to the library to find more resources on running such a business. Then she and her husband Seth Novak invited the business owner for tea so the four of them could brainstorm other ways to make use of Molly's talents. As Molly later explained:

We hobbled along for a while and the job got better, but Mom and Dad and Mrs. Leoff [the business owner] were great when I told them that I was ready to move on after about six months. We figured out a way for me to transition out while Mrs. Leoff found a replacement and I got started with my own services.

In this instance, Evelyn and Seth did not leave it to Molly to solve the problem alone. They instead took the lead and facilitated a more workable situation for their child that also modeled what they considered good business relations. Thus in their efforts to help their children develop a sense of responsibility in their choices, these unschooling parents revealed considerable flexibility and pragmatism in how they respond to a range of challenges. Like other unschoolers, they enabled their children to make low-stakes mistakes over their choices, help them take stock of their reactions, and modeled practices that they perceive as workable when problems arise.

Unschooling parents also seek to instill in their children a sense of responsibility to others beyond their immediate experiences. This includes other homeschoolers, as the following example reveals. Leila Richards-Novak had all her life professed a desire to become a veterinarian. Having seen her sisters begin apprenticeships, she eagerly awaited a chance to work at a vet's office, which her parents allowed when she turned twelve. After a few weeks, Leila realized that she could not abide working with animals in pain and at times participate in their pain. Her parents were supportive as she reconsidered her vocational trajectory. They reflected on the experience as a classic unschooling opportunity to learn

about “real work” in a hands-on manner in a way that would in Seth Novak’s words, “head off wasted time and effort,” in the future.

Despite appreciating the object lesson that this experience provided their daughter, Evelyn and Seth were quite concerned about how Leila managed her changed commitment to the veterinarian. As Seth explained:

We wanted Leila to understand that this was about being a good neighbor both to the vet and to other homeschooling families. We didn’t want him soured on working with other kids in the future.

They apprised Leila of their concerns and included her in finding solutions. Nevertheless, they took a directive approach with the vet and spoke on Leila’s behalf in ways that they themselves might have critiqued as undermining a young person’s emergent sense of agency. This anecdote illustrates that unschoolers at times resolve conflicts in ways that reveal how various unschooling principles and concerns operate in contradictory relationship. In this case, Seth and Evelyn put their concerns over the relationship between homeschoolers and others in the community ahead of a concern over how their daughter might feel about a set of interactions undermining her autonomy.

This resolution was not unique to the Novak-Richards family. Julia Packer, for example, insisted that her fourteen year-old son, Ryan, stick out his commitment to the DVD production company where he worked long after he soured on the job. Ryan realized that although he loved video-editing, he cared little for the drudgery of mixing wedding, Bar Mitzvah and reunion videos. As Julia explained, “He’s there to learn about the work and they’ve come to count on him at least through the end of the year.” Hoping to foster additional problem-solving skills, she encouraged Ryan to investigate with his employer ways

to cultivate more video editing skills. Ryan stuck with the job, although the employer was slower to give Ryan greater responsibilities than the teen would have liked. Through this work, Ryan developed more technical skills, which he eventually parlayed into other jobs.

Similarly, then 14-year-old Alexander Mackler quickly learned that working as an apprentice to a carpenter was not as easy or necessarily as interesting as helping his parents around the house. His father, Scott Mackler put into a wider perspective how many unschooling parents help their children navigate these tensions:

The more serious the venture and the relationship, the more serious the commitment. It's one thing if you want to observe a violin-maker or an astronomer for a couple of weeks, you know 'take your neighbor to work week or something,' but if you actually want to become a real apprentice, you know, work in a garage or become the local florists' left-hand kid, you have to follow through with the commitment as best as you can. Same goes with taking classes at community college.¹²⁹ You can shop around all you want but once you agree to a class, that's the class you take and you do the work on the syllabus. It's like a contract.

In this sense, unschooling parents like Scott, Julia, Evelyn, and Seth found different ways to facilitate how their children responded to relatively long-term commitments. They typically emphasized that their children find ways to honor the responsibilities incurred through their commitments and create tenable relations with mentors. Thus, in many instances, as the

¹²⁹ Scott here alludes to the fact that beginning in their early teens, many unschooled young people take courses at their local and community colleges. Many families see that such courses provide an opportunity for a young person to pursue a given area with some depth. In addition to providing a familiarity with subjects and to some extent, with college coursework, these classes occasionally provide unschoolers looking towards four-year colleges additional credits once they enroll. A number of unschooling texts devote their attention to college admissions (c.f. Cohen, Heuer).

above examples suggest, parents often intervene in different ways, in their children's mentorship endeavors

Yet, these orientations towards work and mentoring opportunities were consistent with unschooling overall. Just as parents of very young unschooled children encourage learning through cause and effect experiences and with "real" materials, so too, do parents of older unschoolers emphasize experiential learning within the community. Moreover, these parents emphasize that the learning that comes through "real" work also carries with it the consequences and responsibilities of work in social settings: mentors sometimes rely upon unschooled young people's labor and botched experiences may carry consequences for other potential mentees in the community. As well, just as parents of young unschoolers have a hand in shaping the contexts in which their children forage for educative experiences, so, too, do parents of older unschoolers.

Thus, even as their children make their way into ever-complex interactions in their wider communities, unschooling parents continue their role as facilitators of their children's educative experiences. In seeking to immerse their children in community life, unschooling parents' roles gradually shift from "safe perch," to resource brokers to consultants. The general tension within the unschooling experience of balancing personal choices and freedoms with ever-growing responsibilities punctuate these transitional processes. And just as parents of young unschoolers' tend to focus on their children's work over their own, they often downplay the extensive parental work of modeling and influencing their children's moves into the wider world.

IV. Conclusion: The Village Epistemology Revisited: Complications of Community Based Education

...I have a confession to make...we have not gone too far or been particularly successful in directly promoting the embryonic development of institutions in our community to carry our vision forward. Like most families with young children, we are busy people, with the usual excuse that home, work, and the essentials of family life lay claim to most of our energy and attention

David H. Albert, from *And the Skylark Sings With Me: Adventures in Homeschooling and Community-Based Education* (1999: 43)

As I suggested at the outset of this chapter, unschoolers typically construct the community-based dimensions of their alternative educational practices in a countercultural framework. They do so based upon critique of what they perceive as the mainstream as well as ideas about the benefits of community-based education for their families and communities. Many unschoolers construct what I call a village epistemology, or an ideal notion of community life through which children might live and learn in and through integration and gradual participation in the life of their local worlds. These countercultural visions of childhood and community life serve as a tool through which to render their practices meaningful.

Some unschoolers, such as David Albert (above), recognize the idealized dimensions of such villages. They serve as a 'vision' to carry forward in the development of vital civic or care-giving institutions in which unschooling might play a role. Other unschoolers draw upon such idealizations, often based upon quaint conceptions of peasant village life or utopian notions of villages and communities, with greater or lesser reflexivity about the extent to which they use these places as exoticized constructions. Regardless, such places

occupy the unschooling countercultural imaginary and often help unschoolers sustain themselves through various types of challenges that they face in daily life.

In addition, many unschoolers find that, as Albert suggests, above, the prosaic matters of daily life often take attention away from the possibilities of a world changed. So too, the alternative constructions of childhood that unschoolers typically articulate include some “mainstream” concessions. As we have seen, unschoolers have a range of experiences, including some challenges, in their efforts to put into practice their community based ideals; their solutions at times come into conflict with other unschooling principles or they reveal general tensions and conflicts over their alternative practices. Furthermore, unschoolers buttress their community-based practices by a number of obscured forms of privilege and considerable parental work, some of which unschoolers themselves downplay.

Now that we have considered both the ideal and some of the lived dimensions of unschoolers’ community-based praxis, we can consider the workings of some of these complications. Below I briefly consider some aspects of how unschoolers’ alternative *perspectives* shape how they see some conflicts over their practices. I also consider the role of what I call parental shaping of children’s experiences as well as some of the gendered entailments of this work. Finally, I detail some of the obscured forms of privilege at work in these practices.

Alternative Constructions Of Childhood?: Shaping What Children Do

We have seen in this and previous chapters, that unschoolers often take an alternative stance in their construction of childhood, particularly their attitudes towards how children spend their time and how children render their experiences as meaningful. We saw this, for

example, in how parents like Rachel Berger more often than not cede to her children the task of making meaning from most of their experiences and in the ways that unschooling parents typically shield their children from quizzes and other efforts to categorize their children's experiences into what many perceive as the objectifying or non-holistic terminology of "subjects." (I consider in the next chapter the extent to which parents can call upon their vectors of advantage to do so when necessary). Moreover, the task of meaning-making is but one of the many responsibilities that unschoolers accord to their children in their efforts to cultivate in their children the ability to manage both freedom and responsibility in the competent pursuit of their affairs. In this sense, unschoolers typically engage in an alternative construction of who children are and how they ought to spend their time.

Yet, throughout this and previous chapters, I have sought to demonstrate how, despite these radical constructions of childhood, unschooling parents' focus upon children's volition at times obscures parents' significant role in shaping their children's experiences. In the context of community-based education, parents generally open their children to a wide range of experiences beyond their homes and typically allow their own roles to evolve apace of their children's development. I have considered how unschooling parents use extensive, yet often occluded, resources of time, money and/or barter, transportation, scouting, negotiation, social networking and advocacy to avail their children of educative opportunities in their communities. Moreover, parents often circumscribe their children's choices in activities based upon a range of parental preferences. Recall, for example, Eve Small's complicated calculus of time, money, and the "schlep factor" of her personal tolerances for transporting her daughter.

Parents also engage in a range of preference-shaping practices that indirectly circumscribe their children's choices through the cultural production of tastes and habits that they cultivate in their children over time. Parents first lay the groundwork and deploy an approach to "exposure" of fields of activity to incorporate their children into their daily lives, their work and their hobbies. In tacit and deliberate ways, unschooling parents cultivate what they often extol as their children's radically independent choices.

Finally, unschoolers often tout as radical their children's relatively early exposure to the world of work through apprenticeships and mentorships. Yet, as the several examples that I considered revealed, parents attenuate their convictions about the role of children's agency with what they often perceive as a need to provide various boundaries either to their children or to potential mentors. In the several instances where conflicts did or were likely to emerge, parents often modulated their convictions about children's agency with pragmatic concerns, to ensure that mentors not feel soured to working with homeschoolers or that their children feel comfortable with abandoning work that did not meet their expectations. In each of these respects, unschooling parents significantly shaped how their children experienced their educative endeavors as they moved into participation in and around their communities.

In this chapter, I have sought to illuminate the various types of complications and forms of work entailed by unschoolers' attempts to produce for their children the ideals of a community-based education. I considered several of the dimensions of what unschoolers typically designate as the most radical aspect of their educative practices and lifestyles. Unschoolers draw upon a village epistemology to construct community based education as a countercultural critique of how the mainstream designates where children belong, with

whom, and the types of activities in which they ought to engage. Yet, the village epistemology occludes as much as it reveals. It occludes various forms of conflicts for example. It also occludes how, in order to enact their critiques and seek ways to integrate their children into the workings of their communities, unschoolers draw upon and cultivate in their children various forms of privilege that range from flexible work, economic advantage and habits of entitlement with regard to influencing institutions within their communities.

Unschooling parents highlight their children's agency in choosing their own activities within the community. Yet they shape and otherwise cultivate their children's community-based educative experiences from infancy forward in ways that range from the contexts in which they include their children in their own work, their preference-shaping influences, and the ways in which they help their older children navigate mentorships and other opportunities in their communities. Thus, as with the other dimensions of their practices, unschooling parents play a significant, yet often downplayed, role in their children's community-based educational endeavors.

Finally, as with other dimensions of unschooling practices, unschoolers typically cede to their children how to render their community-based experiences as sensible and meaningful. Yet, as the examples of how unschoolers help their older children navigate tensions and conflicts with mentors suggest, unschooled children do not, alone, derive "lessons" from their activities. For although unschoolers often background and even malign its role, the state asserts itself as a stakeholder in the educational experiences of unschooled young people. Unschoolers must eventually account their practices to the state.

Now that I have considered the manifold dimensions of unschooling as a set of educative and lifestyle practices within a countercultural framework, I can attend to the ways in which unschoolers manage their encounters with the state. Such encounters require that unschoolers render meaning to their practices within a state-sanctioned educational milieu. Consequently, these encounters bring into tension unschoolers principles and the ways in which their practices might be legitimated within a mainstream educational framework. I consider the workings of these tensions in the following chapter.

Ch. 8: Legal Legitimacy: How Unschoolers Assert “Educational Equivalence”

It doesn't take much for someone who's been to school, which describes most homeschooling parents, to figure out how to put your kids' experience into categories that sound like different school subjects. But the whole thing seems ridiculous to us. Because once you see things as an unschooler, putting labels on things --like calling all the work that goes into planning and tending and harvesting a garden --never mind preparing the food for your family and sharing it with your hungry neighbors-- you know, calling that a “science lesson” seems a little... like you're giving it all short shrift. So, it feels like you're selling your kids out. But, you know, since that's what it takes to keep [homeschooling], that's what we'll do.

(Scott Mackler, Field Notes, June 3rd 2001)

I. The Problem Of Legal Legitimacy And Countercultural Lifestyles

As countercultural practitioners, unschoolers take for granted the philosophical and practical legitimacy of their children's educational experiences. Yet, to retain their legal rights to direct their children's education, they must meet the state's criteria of educational equivalence. For example, the Pennsylvania-based unschoolers in my study must prove that “an appropriate education is occurring” [24 PA Cons. Stat. §13-1327.1 (1988)]. This challenge to navigate the “system” of state-organized education produces tensions for unschoolers, whose principles and practices stand in philosophical and pedagogical

opposition to what they perceive as mainstream educational practices. For as Scott Mackler suggests, above, unschoolers typically find that their task to translate their children's alternative educational experiences into something sensible within the wider educational infrastructure poses a number of philosophical concerns and practical problems. Unschoolers' responses to these challenges illuminate some of the complexities, controversies and compromises that countercultural practitioners navigate when they face the requirements of regulatory institutions.

Despite these basic philosophical challenges, unschoolers in this study typically experience the "state" as a flexible and largely accommodating entity.¹³⁰ This is the case for a range of reasons which include a current educational climate within the neoliberal state marked by heightened regulation for people involved in government-funded schools on the one hand, and an opening up of the educational marketplace to seemingly laissez-faire

¹³⁰ As this is a study of the unschooling as a countercultural movement focused around alternative education, I limit my discussion here to unschoolers' experiences with the state's educational institutions. However, in a noteworthy sideline that reveals the shaping influences of social and educational capital in the gender politics of countercultural practices (a leitmotif of this study), unschooling and the state also figure centrally into struggles over divorces. Several of my female informants who had experienced divorce drew on their own and other women's experiences, to assert that unschooling provided an opportunity to make divorce "much uglier." In Elyse Locke's words:

Women who do alternative things in their lives are often high risk in divorce situations...Divorces are about winning... The child is generally the prize....when you have a parent who is in to alternative things, those things are often looked at with a jaundiced eye by the court. They look skeptically at anything out of the spectrum of conservativity... It is typically a pattern that happens that men will point these alternative things and use them to make the mother look unfit...Nancy Plent [founder of the New Jersey Unschooler's network] said that...she had seen it many times when homeschoolers divorce.

Elyse explained that in the course of her husband's anger over the divorce, he changed his previously enthusiastic position on homeschooling. Additionally, one of my colleagues at Penn, whose daughter unschooled for a number of years during high school, reported a similar experience. She explained that at every court appearance in which she and her ex-husband battle over college tuition, his lawyers routinely raise the homeschooling experience in an effort to undermine both her credibility and to suggest that the homeschooling compromised the daughter's education (Interview June 21, 2005).

Notably, both women attributed their success in these struggles to an ability to draw on social networks for practical support and testimony as well as their ability to "study up" and educate themselves on their legal rights. Additionally, both women suggested that previous experiences in self-advocacy, bolstered by their educational backgrounds, social supports and conviction in their practices helped them find the "voice" to in Elyse's words "come out on top," in these conflicts. Thus, these examples illustrate other dimensions (in these instances with highly gendered inflections) in which social and educational capital influence how countercultural conflicts play out under the aegis of the state.

educational alternatives, such as homeschooling, on the other. These conditions typically mean that school officials attend minimally to homeschoolers. Moreover, the resources that unschoolers bring to the legitimization process (primarily of educational and social capital), map favorably with the workings of the state's regulatory apparatus, i.e., they can talk the talk. In addition, unschoolers benefit because school administrators often find themselves too preoccupied with their own work in schools to carefully attend to homeschoolers.

In this chapter, I consider how, in their ongoing development as countercultural practitioners, unschoolers assert their legitimacy as citizens vis-à-vis the state in generally favorable encounters with the state's regulatory apparatus. I contend that just as with other dimensions of their lifestyles, when unschoolers (and even their children) respond to the challenge to legitimate their practices and at the same time retain their countercultural principles, they draw upon their generally ample educational and social capital as well as their unfolding and confident experiences as countercultural practitioners. As it deals with the key lifestyle dimension of legitimacy, this final chapter advances my case that educational and social capital crucially advantage these countercultural practitioners.

I first consider unschoolers' perspectives on the legal documentation requirements of Pennsylvania homeschoolers, which affect most of the unschoolers in my study. I then illustrate the range of ideological and practical "work," that unschoolers bring to this process. I consider how unschoolers relate to state power and manage conflicts with officials. I then consider how unschoolers navigate the tensions at work in the competing ideas of an "appropriate education." Specifically, I detail the various tactics that unschoolers take when they (and sometimes their children) construct and convey "appropriate educational experience" through portfolios. Finally, I consider unschoolers' agency and

choice in their gate-keeping encounters as they assert legitimacy vis-à-vis the state. Throughout, I illustrate how unschoolers' often ample educational, and social capital advantage them in these processes.

Unschoolers and the Legal Requirements for Pennsylvania Homeschoolers

In 1988, the Pennsylvania legislature enacted Act 169. This amended the Pennsylvania School Code to allow parents or guardians to homeschool their children as an alternative to compulsory school attendance. 24 P.S. §13-1327.1. The statute governing all homeschoolers in Pennsylvania, the commonwealth where I conducted most of my fieldwork, specifies the requirements and responsibilities of the parents and of the officials in their local school districts. Interestingly, unschoolers helped to initially shape the standards of assessment. Their participation reflects one dimension of how unschoolers assert their interests with respect to the state and to other homeschoolers.

For example, from 1985 until 1988 Seth Novak and his then-10 to 13 year-old daughter, Claire Novak-Richards, joined other unschoolers as they lobbied to craft the statute so it would accommodate unschoolers' pedagogies. Both father and daughter described the process as the apex of cooperation and collaboration between the various homeschooling groups in the commonwealth, who for a while, at least, found common interests. "We were certainly odd bedfellows," Seth explained of the collaboration between unschooling and the largely Christian school-at-home homeschooling groups. "They were some of the most tightly organized people that I've ever worked with and they were very effective in lobbying the legislature."

Seth's observations about Christian homeschooling groups map onto what sociologist Mitchell Stevens found when he compared the organizational structure and political efficacy of Christian and secular homeschooling groups, whom he termed "Believer" and secular or "inclusive" homeschoolers, respectively (2001). Like Stevens, Seth correlated the different groups' comfort with hierarchical organization to their political effectiveness. "Once we finally came to an agreement, [the Christian homeschooling groups] were able to organize a mini-army *really* fast, that took their marching orders very seriously and very directly to their state reps, which was *very* helpful." Yet, compromise among homeschoolers took political finesse. Seth explained:

It took *a lot* of effort to get everyone to agree on what the statute should look like. What with all the libertarians, who wanted *no* oversight, which was just naïve. and the hippies like us, who *really* wanted to make sure that we weren't stuck in a standardizing rut that said that education looked like just one thing, and the Christians, god bless 'em, who were so elated to show that homeschooling was *just as good* if not better, than school...And then there was the superintendent's lobby, which wanted to make sure that they retained some kind of control and oversight...Well, it took a while to come up with some compromises.

The resulting "compromises" included the use of portfolios as the essential tool for assessment, the use of standardized testing, the designation of local superintendents as the representatives of the commonwealth's interest and control by the "supervisor" (parent or guardian) over the selection of the state-certified evaluator, who operates as a gatekeeper between the family and the commonwealth.

Among homeschoolers nationally, the requirements of the statute give Pennsylvania a reputation as one of the more “restrictive” or draconian places to homeschool. Families of the commonwealth’s approximately 24,076 homeschoolers¹³¹ must provide for all children of compulsory school age¹³² an affidavit and educational plan, submitted to the local superintendent each year, a portfolio of records and materials, which consist of a log “made contemporaneously with the instruction,” which:

designates by title the reading materials used, samples of any writings, worksheets, workbooks or creative materials used or developed by the student and in grades three, five and eight and results of nationally normed standardized achievement tests in reading/language arts and mathematics or the results of statewide tests administered in these grade levels.¹³³

Someone other than the supervisor (parent or guardian), whom the supervisor selects and hires, administers these tests. In addition, an annual written evaluation of the student's educational progress must accompany the portfolio.

An evaluator can be a licensed clinical or school psychologists or a teacher certified by the Commonwealth or by a nonpublic school teacher or administrator, who has experience at the elementary level to evaluate elementary students or at the secondary level to evaluate secondary students and who is neither the supervisor nor their spouse.

Evaluators base their assessments upon an interview with the child and a review of the

¹³¹ This total comprises 1.1% of the state’s public, private and nonpublic enrollments in 2003-04. The report notes that the distribution of home education students throughout the state corresponded closely to the population density centers. See

http://www.pde.state.pa.us/k12statistics/cwp/view.asp?a=3&q=111856&home_educationPNavCtr=|#6513

¹³² According to 2003-2004. The actual number of homeschoolers in the commonwealth is likely higher than reported, as the Pennsylvania Public School Code of 1949, as amended, does not require that families register children for school or designate them as homeschoolers until age eight.

¹³³ Ibid. I list the full text of the portfolio and evaluator requirements and the requirements of standardized test as these are the most significant to the processes of negotiation and the activation of the various forms of capital that occupy my concern in this chapter.

portfolio. Thus, the responsibility of conferring state sanctioning of the homeschooling rests primarily with the evaluator; s/he certifies “whether or not an appropriate education is occurring.” (24 P.S. §13-1327.1). An additional, if nominal layer of oversight rests with the local superintendents’ office, to which unschoolers annually submit affidavits and portfolios for review once they have been reviewed by an evaluator.

More lax guidelines in other states create a perception that “It’s tough to homeschool in Pennsylvania” (a sentiment I read about and heard at the national and regional homeschooling conferences that I attended). Yet, unschoolers typically do not experience the state as an intrusive institution in their daily lives. Given that these fairly open-ended standards, few unschoolers encounter difficulty achieving a designation from their evaluators that “appropriate education is occurring.”

Unschoolers instead face philosophical challenges in assembling and labeling materials and evidence to meet the state’s standards. First, the statute itself provides unschoolers relative autonomy. Moreover, a combination of current (although sometimes capricious) relatively hands-off conditions of state oversight and unschoolers’ abilities to marshal or (in Lareau’s terminology “activate”) various forms of educational and social capital, play a shaping role in the generally favorable regulatory conditions that most unschoolers enjoy. I explore these workings below and consider first how unschoolers relate to those in power.

Countercultural Conflicts with Officials

The “concession to the superintendent’s lobby” as Seth Novak described it, which assigns local superintendents’ oversight over homeschooling programs in their districts leaves

homeschoolers somewhat vulnerable to the caprices of local officials. Stories of school officials' hostility towards homeschooling and/or ignorance of the law are less commonplace than in years past, when homeschooling itself was less commonplace. Nevertheless, unschoolers frequently contend that, despite the many safeguards and routes to appeal built into the statutes, local officials can frustrate a homeschooling family's activities.

How unschoolers attenuate these conditions and navigate potential conflicts reveals the advantages of educational, economic and social capital at work, which I will highlight in a number of ways. First, unschoolers typically enjoy ample educational capital, which accords them facility with the mores and language of schooling and the accompanying confident dispositions towards school and state officials (c.f. Bourdieu, *State Nobility*). Notably, some of these countercultural practitioners initially lacked such educational capital or sense of confidence in their ability to deal with agents of the state. Therefore, to bolster their arguments and ranks, they often cultivated social networks among unschoolers, which they can draw upon to facilitate these processes with practical, tactical and philosophical supports. Some parents described this experience of bolstering their confidence as "getting the lingo" of the requirements.

Educational capital also shapes and influences how unschoolers deal with local officials in two additional ways. First, unschoolers (particularly those in my study) lived in relatively well-funded school districts where administrators were accustomed to dealing with families with relatively ample educational, social and economic capital and who often engage with school officials as providers of services and expect favorable outcomes (c.f. Lareau 2000). For just as unschoolers often expect local civic and commercial institutions to accommodate their needs (as I showed in the previous chapter), so too do they expect

favorable outcomes with state officials. In addition, for some unschoolers, economic capital proved advantageous in circumstances where they felt dissatisfied with the local districts; these families marshaled their economic resources to effectively “buy out” of the homeschooling law and enrolled in distance-learning programs in private schools. They effectively circumvented the requirements of the homeschooling statute. Below I consider how unschoolers draw upon their resources of educational capital and social networks to avert or manage conflicts with educational officials.

Both anecdotes involve the Novak-Richards family, longtime unschoolers and fonts of leadership and information in their local unschooling community. Over the course of several years, Seth Novak and Evelyn Richards cultivated a friendly relationship with the superintendent of their local school district with whom they often exchanged educational philosophy and shared regular contact. The superintendent even attended the “graduation ceremony” that Claire Novak-Richards and her family hosted when she felt “ready” to graduate at age eighteen. Seth once highlighted the strength of this relationship when he apologized for a delay in returning a phone message that I had left. He explained that he, Evelyn and Nathan, their youngest child (then 17) were “...at our annual love fest with the superintendent” of their local district.

Others in their local community expressed gratitude for the groundwork that Evelyn and Seth had laid with this official, who earned for his township a reputation among unschoolers as particularly “friendly” towards their type of homeschooling. Yet, unschoolers also claimed that these kinds of relationships were not “deal-makers or breakers,” in their homeschooling or choice of residence. As Scott Macker explained:

We’re really grateful to not have a hostile situation whenever we satisfy our legal

obligations, and that's a credit to Evelyn and Seth and the other[s] [homeschoolers] in the community for getting along so well. And we really appreciate that [the superintendent]'s so open-minded. But, if it came down to it, we'd still homeschool no matter how the local officials feel about it.

Here Scott attributes the skills of "getting along" and a personality feature, i.e.

"temperament," of officials as important (but not limiting) dimensions of how unschoolers experience their interactions with local educational officials. From Scott's perspective, the only variable has to do with the affective tenor of the experiences: whether unschoolers do *their* part in getting along well and whether or not the official engages in pleasantries and "open-minded" exchange. In these ways, Scott takes on a highly agentic perspective and never calls into question that unschoolers can ultimately prevail in their ability to assert their preferences.

Scott's conviction that "they would still homeschool regardless," shared by other homeschoolers in the community, was challenged and borne out the following fall. During the sabbatical of the superintendent with whom they had engaged in much relationship-building, members of the homeschooling community in which the Novak-Richards family lived found themselves faced with an acting superintendent who was less amenable to the enterprise. Seth Novak had fielded a frantic, Friday-night phone call from a neophyte homeschooling family. The acting superintendent told the parents that unless they produced a detailed affidavit of their intentions to homeschool within 48 hours, they would be thrown in jail for truancy violations and their children would be taken into state custody.

Seth pointed out to the parents that the deadline was arbitrary and that the official pointed out a process that conflicted with the law. As Seth explained:

This confrontation made things less pleasant, but ultimately we simply drew on our knowledge of the law to make it very clear that this man wasn't going to push us or any other homeschooling family around. Period. We informed him of the real deadlines for the affidavits and we told him that we didn't appreciate his efforts to intimidate homeschooling families with misinformation. That got him to back off.

How these unschoolers managed a conflict with school officials in this instance aptly illustrates the privileged workings of ample social and educational capital in this countercultural movement. First, the neophyte homeschoolers enjoyed a favorable outcome because they drew upon social networks that brought them to advocates such as Seth and Evelyn. These seasoned homeschoolers in turn, drew upon their knowledge of the law and sense of ease in dealing with officials to produce avert conflicts and produce favorable experiences of homeschoolers in their community. These forms of social and educational capital based in one's knowledge of the workings of the system and a sense of ease in dealings with officials characterizes one of the privileges of the educated classes, as Bourdieu suggests (1996). Lareau (1999) also describes the significance of such key coalescing moments that recharge practitioners as the "activation" of social capital.

Since a preference for self-reliance over reliance on "experts" operates as a salient principle among unschoolers, I encountered many parents who, like Seth, express strongly-held opinions regarding how to deal with "the law."¹³⁴ Most unschoolers articulated the pervasive orientation to seek information and to make their own judgments. This directly reflected unschoolers' orientation to being informed citizens that is to "read [the laws] for

¹³⁴ It also explains why so many unschoolers and secular homeschoolers refrain from purchasing the "legal protection services" that the evangelical Christian-run HSLDA (Home School Legal Defense Association) offers its thousands of subscribers for \$100 annually. See <http://homeschoolingislegal.info/insurance.asp> for critical accounts of the HSLDA and this set of services.

themselves”¹³⁵ in Seth’s words. Like other unschoolers, Seth felt quite capable and comfortable with this “responsibility.” I identified this strain of self-reliance and suspicion towards experts in chapter four, where I considered how unschoolers eschew the expertise of care-giving professionals such as doctors and educational experts. Here again, we see how they rely upon their educational and social capital to “look up” the law and draw upon the experiences of other unschoolers to deal with agents of the state. Moreover, these generally well-educated parents typically take a consumer-oriented approach to public servants and expect a favorable outcome.

For these reasons, I was somewhat surprised that Seth and Evelyn made contacts on behalf of the neophyte family who experienced difficulties with their acting superintendent. It seemed like a move that undermined the parents’ agency in resolving the problem on their own. When I asked Seth to explain the logic of his and his wife’s actions, he said:

Well. I did encourage them to read the law for themselves. But they were new at this. And scared *and* we were really outraged at this [assistant superintendent]’s ignorance and his arrogance. Also, we were perhaps a little over-protective of the other families in this area; we’ve worked hard to help [them] and they deserve to homeschool in peace.

Thus, Seth and Evelyn decided to balance the principles of self-reliance and personal autonomy they espoused with solidarity with and protection for local homeschoolers. In these leadership moves, they took action on behalf of others outside of their family. This action suggests that unschoolers sometimes make calculated judgments or pragmatic moves

¹³⁵ This theme circulates throughout the unschooling public sphere; it emerges most frequently in the writings of Larry and Susan Kaseman, whose column, “Taking Charge,” appears regularly in *Home Education*, a magazine for secular homeschoolers to which many unschoolers subscribe. The Kasemans typically take a pro-privacy, anti-regulatory position on most topics and offer readers suggestions on how to preserve “homeschooling freedoms.”

in the name of the wider movement, which they feel ameliorate outside challenges faced by other unschoolers. In these ways, part of unschoolers' countercultural experiences include the activation of social networks for advocacy and guidance as they develop growing confidence in their abilities to contend with their legal requirements as homeschoolers.

The above examples address the kind of challenges that Pennsylvania homeschoolers of all pedagogical and political stripes might face. Yet issues around educational equivalence affect unschoolers in unique ways. In the following section, I consider how unschoolers respond to this challenge distinctly.

Swords Aplenty! : The Principled Problem with "Equivalence"

In order to navigate their encounters with the state, unschoolers must bridge a philosophical divide between their conceptions of education and the language and mores of curriculum embedded in conventional schooling. The very notion of educational equivalence suggests that what unschoolers do at home and in their communities approximates the activities and intellectual development of their school-going counterparts. Yet, unschoolers typically contend that they enact an alternative education and lifestyle that challenge the conventions of education. The anecdote below reveals the frustrations that "educational equivalence" poses for many unschoolers:

"How can I include the sword and explain what it's meant to him this year?" lamented, Lisa Cola-Fitzgerald at a parent's potluck dinner organized at the home of Cindy and Frank Gordon. The Gordons had gathered a number of "neophyte" and "veteran" unschooling parents to a mid-May meal to share ideas and diffuse stress over the upcoming "portfolio season." This was Lisa and her husband Richard's first portfolio. Lisa explained

that her seven year-old son, Anthony had, for a number of weeks, built and played with wooden swords with several of his friends. He'd practiced sword-play for hours daily and developed what Lisa described as a "healthy obsession:"

He started to seek out all kinds of stories and movies that featured sword fights: *The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the Arthurian legends, you name it! And then [we started to read] the reference books on swords and the different styles of sword fighting and then how they're made, you know with smelting and metallurgy and Bronze Age, and the Samurais and then we got into histories of feudalism in Japan and then in Europe. And then one day, I think it was in the middle of this jag on the Samurais, right Ritchie? Anthony just suddenly got sick of waiting for me to come over to read with him so he just started reading to himself! It's just so frustrating...there *is* no one subject for all that! There might not be *any* ten subjects for that matter!

Lisa's story illustrates the chasm between how she understands her child's experiences and how she perceived the mainstream educational context into which she needed to render those meanings sensible. Like other unschoolers, Lisa and Richard possess the resources to prove equivalence; they have enough facility with "educationese," (a term many unschoolers use to describe the language and mores of conventional education) to parse Anthony's experiences in to the categories of school "subjects." As well, if the Fitzgerald-Colas run into difficulty, they have a social network of people who can offer strategies to address the task.

Yet, unschoolers like Lisa and Richard feel frustrated not by the process of informing the state of the "subjects" that their child's work entailed, but rather, they feel that

this process reveals an incompatibility between an unschooling education and what they perceive as the educational practices that take place through schooling. That many conventional schools engage in long-term, cross-subject or project-based learning seem to rarely enter the unschooling imaginary. Unschoolers instead feel that “the State” and its conventional curricula ignore instrumental learning and are simplistically “subject” bound.

Thus, for unschoolers like Lisa and Richard, legal legitimacy creates mostly principled, rather than practical, tensions. For the notion of educational equivalence hinges on contested definitions over what constitutes an “appropriate education”; finding a way to demonstrate such equivalence raises, for many unschoolers, the challenge of whether, how, and to what extent to try to translate their family’s experience into a language of curriculum and to what extent to reveal their educational praxis to state officials.

Unschoolers chafe at the concept of “curriculum,” for two reasons. First, they often contend that curricula distill into “subjects” the types of integrative learning that they believe take place in their children’s lives and thus do not do justice to their children’s activities. As well, curricula represent priorities and apparatus for meaning-making extrinsic to children themselves, which run counter to the child-centered orientation of unschooling.

Moreover, because unschoolers proudly see their practices in countercultural terms vis-à-vis conventional education, many take a recalcitrant position with respect to the state. Unschooling father of three, Bruce Maxwell succinctly encapsulated this sentiment when he explained, “The less *they* know what unschooling is actually about, the better,” (emphasis original). Similarly, Scott Mackler explained this set of challenges as well as how his family responds:

While I think that the homeschooling statute was drafted to be as hands-off about

how families learn --that's why they fought for the portfolio approach to begin with. I would imagine that most school officials will be less amenable to things that fall outside of the educational paradigm they're used to. You know, they probably have less problems with school-at-home families, because they can relate to what they're doing, even if they don't like that those families are funneling away school tax dollars. But unschooling poses more of a problem [for school officials] because it's not really part of their paradigm. So we do part of the work for them and we let them figure out the other part.

Like other unschoolers, Scott here "imagines" a type of irresponsible school official who would be hostile to unschooling pedagogy and thus takes an oppositional stance. This construction of school officials seems fixed within the unschooling cultural imaginary, even among unschoolers who face unschooling-friendly officials.

Notably, Scott couched his words in terms of "paradigms" --a concept that reflects his own local unschooling network's interest in different educational theories. His use of the term also reflects a widespread perception among unschoolers that unschooling amounts to an entirely different, alternative, perspective on educational experiences from what unschoolers perceive as "mainstream" education. Scott's reference to the "funneling away" of school tax dollars also reflects a widespread perception among homeschoolers of an additional, material, source of conflict with "the system." For while homeschoolers still pay school taxes, when they do not enroll their children in local schools, they cost districts their per capita enrollment-based revenues.¹³⁶

Unschoolers feel they can simplify how they comply with state educational statutes

¹³⁶ Like other homeschoolers, unschoolers express a range of positions with respect to educational funding (see Nemer 2004)

when they do much of the work of translating their educational practices for school officials. In other words, they typically see it as their job to “translate” or parse their children’s activities into school-like subjects. Somewhat ambivalent towards the state and rather confident in their abilities, most unschoolers find success when they, in Scott Mackler’s words, “do part of the work” for the state. The extent to which unschoolers “do the work” however suggests a range of praxis, which I consider below.

II. “Doing the Work” For the State: How Unschoolers Convey “Educational Equivalence” Through Portfolios

The statute was not drafted with an exclusive school-at-home model. The whole point of the portfolio was a compromise to convey [the idea that] educational equivalence did not necessarily mean school routines. We made a convincing case that children could learn in a myriad of styles and some of the legislators captured that spirit when they adopted the statute.

-Evelyn Richards, on the unschooling-friendly “spirit” of the portfolio assessment.

We always figured that if we want to make a scrapbook of what we did this year, that’s lovely. But how we spend our days is *our* business, so our portfolios show as little as we can get away with.

-Vanessa Fields, on how she and her husband approach portfolios.

Unschoolers exhibit a continuum of approaches towards compliance when they compile their portfolios. This continuum provides a small window onto how and why they construct

their countercultural praxis as non-threatening or indeed compliant for a mainstream institutional audience. Just as their countercultural identities evolve over time, so too do individual families' perspectives on portfolios and how they compile them may evolve over time as portfolios sometimes take on different meanings for families, particularly after unschooling children begin to participate in their preparation (often around ages 10 or 11 depending upon the family and the proclivities of a given young person). Thus, unschooling parents conveyed that they often, over time, through experience and changing circumstances, took up different positions regarding what Wendi Brice described as the dilemma of "just how much to reveal."

Unschooling families responded to these dilemmas in different, yet typical ways. For example, some families who take on what I describe below as an "exuberant" position, feel obliged to educate local school officials on what they perceive as the significance and benefits of their alternative educational practices. These families try to befriend and/or teach the local officials about unschooling principles and practices through their portfolios. Others, for reasons such as privacy, skepticism, and expedience took a more elusive approach. However, most unschoolers I encountered approach the process with what I describe as "cautious compliance;" they neither hide nor emphasize their non-curricular approach to education. The elements of the continuum that I present below reveals a range of often-shifting practices through which unschoolers approach the portfolio as a tool to construct and convey educational experiences.

Exuberant Advocacy: Practices To Show A "Great Education"

In our family's homeschooling, we believe that learning and living go hand in hand,

every hour of every day and therefore do not have a set schedule for our homeschooling. In the following pages, you'll see how our children grow and learn all the time through unschooling.

-Cover text for Karin Maxwell's first portfolio for her daughter Zoey,

1999

Other than Evelyn Novak and Seth Richards, who shared what amounted to an extremely collegial relationship¹³⁷ with their local superintendent, I found few seasoned unschoolers who consistently worked to show local educational officials the virtues of an unschooling education. Nevertheless, many unschoolers conveyed a sense that such efforts were a part of a developmental process of their *own* experiences in becoming countercultural practitioners, what Karin Maxwell reflected upon as "A step in my own journey of becoming unschooled."

Thus, in 1999 Karin used her first portfolio to share her exuberance about unschooling pedagogy with her local school officials. To detail her transforming countercultural identity, Karin described herself as a "recovering people-pleaser" and a "goodie-goodie." Thus, when it came time to validate unschooling, she was "almost as enthusiastic about *sharing* these amazing experiences" as she was about unschooling itself. Like other unschoolers who engage in what I describe as "exuberant" advocacy, Karin treated the portfolio as an occasion to "show people who I figured are used to doing

¹³⁷ In this regard, Evelyn and Seth were somewhat distinct among unschoolers in three respects, which Seth himself articulated to me at different times. First, as early activists in the unschooling lobbying efforts in Pennsylvania, they felt committed to the principles of the "spirit" of the portfolio, which they had helped pass through the legislature. In addition, they felt motivated to make things easier for the homeschooling families in their area. Most significantly, I suspect, as co-directors of a homeschooling resource center, they enjoyed status as "educators" and were genuine colleagues with the superintendent.

learning one way that what we're doing is different but really amazing." Like other unschoolers, Karin saw the portfolio process as a way to validate her experiences and as an occasion to share her countercultural practices with what she saw as the "pinnacle of the mainstream."

So, for example, under the "physical education" page of Zoey's portfolio, Karin detailed Zoey's activities that mapped easily onto this subject. She included ballet, swimming, community soccer league and near-daily walks in the woods. She would continue to list these and other such activities in later portfolios. For this first portfolio, however, she also provided a detailed explanation of what she described as her daughter's "Fort work":

For several months from summer through the fall, Zoey made more and more elaborate forts, which she plays in for hours with her brothers and her friends. She has always been an avid and skilled tree climber, but now, in this work, Zoey has learned to carefully work in and around the trees and has developed her dexterity with tools. This ongoing work has not only enhanced her imaginative play and her love of being outdoors, it has helped her hone her skills in planning and executing projects –by herself and in cooperation with others.

Similarly, on the page that was to convey equivalence in mathematics education, Karin first included the more routine experiences that she counted as mathematics, which included workbook sheets and experiences in basic arithmetic through dealing with money. She supplemented these with a detailed explication of Zoey's cooking experiences. While it is not uncommon for unschoolers to describe what they perceive to be the myriad ways that children learn mathematics through daily experiences such as cooking, Karin took great pains to show what she perceived of as the multi-faceted dimensions of meal preparation for

one's family and on occasion, those in one's community. Karin explained that in this way, she sought to show that

Anything that people do, no matter on what subject page you put it, has so many lessons in it...That's the point of unschooling, that 'living and learning' are the same! Such exuberant, detailed, and multi-faceted interpretations of the various forms of "work" are common to how unschoolers construct children's activities, particularly when they are provided occasions to explain unschooling principles such as "play equals work" or "learning equals living."

Yet, when it comes to providing dutiful reporting to entities such as the state, these exuberant interpretations are less common on the portfolios of experienced unschoolers. They tend to take a more tacit approach. For this first attempt, however, Karin embraced what she interpreted as the manifold opportunities of the portfolio. For example, at the time she also felt that the portfolio would be a "gift" for her daughter:

I saw it as a chronicle for her of what her life has been like and I figured that it would help her to have something to point to when people asked her about what she did as an unschooler. So it was this personal sort of gift for Zoey...Like a little scrapbook that she could also show people if she didn't feel like explaining unschooling for the millionth time!

Thus, like other unschoolers who approached their portfolios with exuberance, Karin sought to use the portfolio to convey the strengths of unschooling. She constructed this process as a "gift," for two perceived audiences. Karin perceived her daughter and her daughter's potential challengers as the first audience. The teachers and administrators who would read the portfolio as "Open and maybe even interested colleagues or something," formed the

second audience.

When Karin identified herself as a “colleague” to teachers, I wondered if this approach contradicted unschoolers’ typical constructions of themselves as their children’s “resource people,” as opposed to “teachers” and asked her what this meant for how she saw her role.

Well, I’m not a teacher, of course, I think that some [teachers] do amazing work and all, but no, I’m just mom who’s been spending a lot of time watching a child learn and I do know a whole lot about that...So I figured, at the time, that since that’s their job, they might have been interested in our way of doing things....Maybe they were, who knows?

Here, Karin offers a dual construction of herself in both diminutive and expert terms. She balances her self-effacing and gender-specific self-construction, “I’m just a mom” with a claim to alternative expertise, as someone who knows a “whole lot” about “watching a child learn” and whose knowledge might be of interest to other types of experts. Karin’s comfort with this collegial position towards the teachers who she imagined were reading the portfolios revealed the sense of ease that she had with dealing with those in authoritative positions—a trait that she attributed to her growing confidence as an unschooler, which developed over time.

When I reviewed Zoey’s later portfolios, I asked Karin to reflect on her experiences in assembling them. Karin indicated that over the course of years, she soured on this effusive and collegial position for several reasons. First, like other unschoolers, she claims that she “got over” herself i.e., became more confident in her practices and felt less need to validate them. She also felt less of a collegial relationship with the teachers who reviewed the

portfolios in large part due to the administrative realities of how portfolios were reviewed in her district. As seemed common among the districts for the unschoolers in my study, teachers in need of credit or additional paid hours, rather than those who taught similar grades, reviewed the portfolios. Karin explained that when she went to retrieve her portfolio in September, she:

couldn't tell if anyone had actually bothered to look at it. If they did, they were either not impressed or they didn't get it. Or maybe they got it and just didn't have any response beyond that. It's hard to say. But I figured next time, why bother making such an effort? I think that I had this sudden realization like, 'Hey, we're pleased with what we do and I certainly don't need them to validate that.' It was like this last vestige of my schooled self realizing that I didn't need approval from teachers anymore.

Like other unschoolers I encountered, Karin initially expected an effusive response or an ongoing dialogue about educational praxis from the school. Yet, the school officials' recalcitrance prompted her to take a renewed and jaded sense of her audience and of the process. Thus, Karin's comments reveal her own unschooling process, one in which she sees herself as no longer in need of validation from the school. Thus, like many of the unschoolers who I encountered, taking an effusive approach or attempting to "sell unschooling to teachers," (as Karin later described the experience) held little appeal and staying power over time.

As Karin readied her family for their third evaluation in 2001, she commented to me that:

I still think that it is a gift for Zoey to have a great record each year, but that's for

her, you know? And she doesn't really need any fire-power to deal with other people, that was my thing, I think. So I've gotten over that whole show-offy, zealotry thing by now. I think it's something you have to go through, like in that expression, "Every new convert is a zealot" or something?" I'm totally over that, now!

As the case with other unschoolers I encountered, when Karin reflects on her initial portfolio as designed to reveal the virtues of her praxis, she shows this process as part of her development of her countercultural identity as an unschooler. Notably, Karin initially believed that her efforts would help her daughter to counter challenges about unschooling. Yet, she conveys a sense that her daughter, raised in an environment that affirms unschooling, has little need for such tools. Thus Karin instead re-frames the "gift" to Zoey as something far more personal and affective. In these ways, Karin, like other unschoolers, sees a portfolio designed to "show off" as part of an early developmental stage in her countercultural identity.

Other unschoolers in my research conveyed similar processes and experiences with "zealotry." Many suggested that over time, they became less effusive about how they *conveyed* unschooling through their portfolios to the state and even to people who asked about it. As Cindy Gordon, who suggested a similar experience to Karin's explained, "It's not that I'm any less gung-ho about unschooling, it's that I'm less gung-ho about the need to share it." This is further evidence that many parents' shifting perspective on contending with portfolios, or other opportunities to legitimate their practices, related to their unfolding identities as confident, self-evident countercultural practitioners.

Elusiveness: Flying Under The Radar Screen Through Terse Portfolios

Other unschoolers resolved the tensions between unschooling principles and issues of educational equivalence by obscuring their unschooling approach to homeschooling. For some, this terse, obfuscated approach represented the next step of their development as countercultural practitioners, while others initially approached portfolios in this manner. All of these parents simply and tersely aligned their children's activities with the specified subject areas. In doing so, they often called upon their facility with the language of curriculum to translate their lived experiences into the discrete categories set forth by the statutes and by the state-wide curricular requirements. They often made tactical decisions to hide what they saw as the holistic educational dimensions of their children's experiences. These unschoolers took what Wendi Brice described as a "less is more approach," for a number of reasons, which, for many, included expedience, a disdainful perspective on the state and/or solidarity with other unschoolers. In the latter instance, I encountered many unschoolers who suggested that the more information about their practices they revealed to the state, the more would be expected in the future and of all homeschoolers.

Thus, for example, to document the "mathematics" experiences of their oldest son, David (then nine years old), Vanessa and Mitchell Fields chose to omit from the portfolio what they considered their son's major mathematics work for the 2000-2001 school year. Throughout the year, David raised money for a favorite activity, a program that bi-weekly brought companion dogs to the eldercare facilities, including the one that the Fields visited weekly. As a fund-raiser, David made and sold beaded friendship bracelets and pins. He kept meticulous records for the project: supplies, inventory, expenses, earnings and the amounts that he donated to the organization. Both Vanessa and Mitchell drew upon their

knowledge of child development to detail to me the different dimensions of David's activities in terms of what they speculated he learned from the experience. They felt that David "developed" in areas that included "general problem solving" "art," "arithmetic," "spatial organization," "pattern recognition," "basic accounting," "advertising," "marketing," and in Vanessa's words, "the habits of compassion." Yet for the portfolio, they simply described the fundraiser as "community service."

For David's formal mathematical "subject area," they simply copied the titles of a few subject areas from a mathematics workbook that David used to "play school." The Fields also, with little fanfare, displayed an alternative approach to mathematics. They detailed David's work with Cuisenaire® rods and the workbooks that accompanied these wooden manipulative items. Advocates of Cuisenaire® rods (which include some mathematics educators), contend that they introduce mathematics concretely. Like the Fields family, many unschoolers find this concrete approach more logical and, in Mitchell Fields' words, "developmentally appropriate," than the "abstraction" that they often attribute to conventional mathematics education. When these parents choose to go into little detail over their choices in educational material, they display educational capital through both their facility with mathematics education and their confidence that their seemingly appropriate choices will not meet insurmountable challenges from evaluators.

When I asked them to illuminate the logic behind the choice to downplay what they expressed as the mathematically "richer" and more "genuine" of the two educative experiences in favor of what appeared to be more standard but less holistic, Mitchell explained,

Look, we're not necessarily hiding that we unschool, but we're not making a big deal

of it either. We thought at first that if we showed them all the amazing things [we do], we could, you know, show them a thing or two about how children can learn. But then we talked about it and we thought “whose this *them* anyway?” It’s teachers, right? We have plenty of *them* in our family and they’re pretty set in their ways!... Besides, what would they do with our information? Maybe just give us a hard time next year or make things harder for the unschoolers down the street... So we figured “why bother?”

Like other unschoolers who were elusive about their practices, Mitchell expresses an extraordinary confidence in his family’s practices alongside his perception of schools as rigid and incompatible with the type of learning that he perceives takes place through unschooling. This approach also reflects how many, but not all, homeschoolers disengage with schools (Welner 2004), and who treat as a “lost cause” the abilities of people in schools to adapt to new pedagogies.

Moreover, like other parents who were elusive about their unschooling practices, Mitchell expresses a suspicion that if they provide too much detail they will raise the expectations for upcoming years or for other unschoolers. In this way, these parents expressed a type of tactical solidarity with other unschoolers and homeschoolers through their effort to, in Vanessa Fields’ words, “keep the bar low.” Thus, like the Fields family, the portfolios of many seasoned unschoolers reflected how they took a taciturn and, in some respects, skeptical approach to the state’s requirements.

Cautious Compliance

By far, most of the unschoolers who I encountered engage in what I describe as “cautious

compliance” when they construct their portfolios: To resolve some of the principled tensions they feel arise when they need to render their unschooling practices meaningful to an audience of “mainstream” educational officials, they neither go out of their way to obscure their educative practices nor do they make great efforts to highlight what they find distinctive, unique or compelling about them. I use the modifier “cautious” to describe this approach to compliance because these unschoolers typically engaged in practices and expressed opinions that revealed a jaundiced perspective towards the process in general and, in many instances, to the benevolence of the state.

Many of these unschooling parents described the requirements of the portfolio as a nuisance. They nevertheless treated it pragmatically as a basic fact of their lifestyles. Moreover, many families sought out different ways to make the most of the process or, in Wendi Brice’s words “find the gift” in it. Thus many families, such as the Mackler-Brices, treated the portfolio as an annual occasion to commemorate their unschooling activities and as an opportunity to incorporate their children into these processes.

Moreover, as unschooled children grow up, they find different ways to respond to people’s questions and challenges to their educational practices and their lifestyles. In most families, parents accord their children growing leadership in these responses as they get older. The portfolio process provides an additional venue for unschooled children to practice the habits of making sense of their own experiences for both themselves and an audience that (depending in large part upon their parent’s dispositions) they may or may not perceive as friendly to their story.

I observed several cautiously compliant families develop their portfolios. Yet, for the sake of brevity and clarity, I draw upon the experiences of the Mackler-Brices for several

reasons. First, among these families, they were by far the most introspective of their processes. Second, among the unschooled teens and pre-teens in my study, I had the best rapport with the three Mackler-Brice children. Third, having known and spent time with this family throughout my research, I was very familiar with many of the specific unschooling activities that they rendered into their portfolios. Thus below, I consider some of the salient dimensions of how the five members of the Mackler-Brice family produced their annual portfolios in June 2001, which they later in the month submitted for review to their homeschooling evaluator and their local superintendent, both of whom they considered “unschooling friendly.”

Despite the clear, sunny weather, the Mackler-Brices resigned to stay indoors for much of their “portfolio day” on Saturday June 2, 2001. Wendi Brice had worked backwards from the June 30th deadline and thought they might need the additional time as this was 11year-old Chloe’s first “solo attempt” at writing her own portfolio. Wendi helped her children go through file folders and the boxes where they stored photos and memorabilia from that year. As she flipped through some of the pictures and smiled, she reminded her children (and explained to me) her credo that “less is more!” She then disappeared for a moment into the kitchen to take the family calendar off the refrigerator. Her husband, Scott Mackler, came into the living room and placed several notepads on the coffee table. He elaborated their evolved approach to the portfolios:

It’s not that they’re unimportant or that we don’t take them seriously, especially when you think about the possible alternatives. But, when we thought about the audience, well, we can’t be sure exactly what they’re thinking, but we thought that it would be a shame to put in all that effort *and* we worried about getting carried away.

But these days, the kids kind of make it theirs, so it's more like a kind of scrapbook that some stranger will be reading. You have to be careful, but at least it seems a little more worthwhile.

Thus both Scott and Wendi approached the process with a sense that their children's participation enhanced its value. Wendi's credo that "less is more," meaning that one should be selective in what they revealed, captured how she and her husband wished for their children to approach their intended audience with reserve, if not caution.

As the family convened around the living room's coffee table, each person set themselves to different tasks. Alexander perused his "reading journal" where he listed and annotated comments on the books he read. Meanwhile, Samantha and Chloe rummaged through the boxes of memorabilia and photos and began to sort them into piles near the cards that Scott made. The cards corresponded with the subject areas appropriate to the curriculum requirements for each child. Earlier, Scott checked the list against the affidavit and "educational plan" that they had submitted prior to the school year.¹³⁸

Wendi, in the meantime, set to work with the calendar and a note pad with the name of each of her children at the top. "This is something that Evelyn Richards taught me a while back," she explained:

The law says that we need to record some kind of contemporaneous account of their work. So we just use our regular family calendar—all twelve months of it-- as a springboard. I probably add more details to the calendar than I would if we weren't homeschooling, but it's just a list of words to jog my memory. See, for example,

¹³⁸ To avoid charges of truancy, all homeschooling families in the commonwealth must submit an affidavit and educational plan prior to the start of each school year. Families typically use the requirements for their children's given "grades," i.e. the required curriculum for that year, to construct their educational plans. They submit these documents to their local districts.

almost every Thursday, Chloe and I have our mother and daughter book club and the one I do with Samantha usually meets Sundays. I write down any activity that requires carpooling or coordinating with other people. By the time we finish recording this stuff, there's usually a pretty good account of contemporaneous activity...Of course, we may not include everything, if it feels like a stretch, or an invasion of our private lives, but getting it down for our records gives us a start.

Thus, Wendi begins to align her family's loosely structured unschooling temporalities onto something that approximates a school calendar. Notably, in the kind of social learning that pervades unschoolers' experiences, Wendi drew this technique from other like-practicing, like-minded parents. In addition, in this and in other dimensions of the process, she and Scott continually affirm a propensity to under-report their activities. This was a recurrent theme not only for this family but also for all of the cautiously compliant unschooling families that I encountered.

Thus when Alexander looked up from his book list he turned to Wendi for suggestions on how to proceed:

Okay, ma, I think I read about 75 books this year, and I've got my list of magazines and instruction manuals. So I'm thinking that I'm gonna list the magazines and the manuals first, then put, like what my top what, 45 books? What do you think?

In a fashion typical to Wendi and a number of the unschoolers I encountered, Wendi returned the question to her son in a way that she felt would help him arrive at his own solution:

Well, I think that it makes sense to list the magazines, since they mostly show different kinds of areas that you're working on and they more or less match some of

the subjects on the list. As far as the books go, think about which were your favorites. You might also want to think about how many you plan to read next year. Then, maybe think about how many books someone like [Alexander's friend] Jonah might be up to reading next year, too. That should help you come up with a list, right?

In this response, Wendi encourages her son to remain in charge of the reporting process. Although she does not provide her son a direct answer, she still encourages his process of elimination. Here we see how, like other unschoolers, Wendi seeks to inculcate her children into a sense that they need comply in a minimal way to the requirements of the law. Like other unschoolers, Wendi described this approach in terms of "keeping the bar low." "Look, we happen to be a very book-ish family, I'm the first to admit that we totally fit the homeschooling stereotype that way," Wendi explained with a laugh, as she gestured around her living room, which was lined floor-to ceiling with bookcases on three of the four walls. "But we have three very big reasons to trim our reading list," she continued:

First of all, we just read way too many books to keep an accurate record. But, more importantly, we really don't want to impress the school district with our big reading list. You know, for Alex's sake, I'd hate for them to say. "Well, you read eighty books last year, so how come you only read thirty this year?" That's just not the kind of thing [that] someone should have to explain, especially to teachers, who probably don't have *their* students reading quite that much, you know? [laughs]. But our third reason has to do with other homeschoolers. I mentioned Alex's friend Jonah because he's the kind of amazing kid who does all sorts of things, like music and theater and clowning at a nursing home and all this cool stuff with astronomy and

model rockets, but he's just not that much of a reader. I've helped him find tons of reference books and he pores through certain kinds of technical magazines, some pretty esoteric stuff, actually, but he's not much of a book kid. And he happens to live in our district. So when I ask Alex to think about himself next year or [to think about] Jonah...it's how we keep the bar nice and low for other peoples' sake.

When Wendi encourages her son to consider the consequences of how he reported his activities, she conveyed several considerations that she shares in common with many unschoolers. First, she expressed pragmatic concerns over accurate record-keeping. She also encouraged her child to develop his own, personal standards for his work. In addition, although Wendi constructs her district as generally "unschooling friendly" she shares with many unschoolers a concern over the operations of the "state," namely that reported activity might evolve into increased expectations and eventually, into policy (Cite Kasemans' article). Finally, by invoking Jonah, Wendi seeks to encourage in her son habits of solidarity.

I wondered if state requirements inform what unschoolers chose to do and asked Wendi which, if any of their activities or how they recorded them took place on account of the requirements. She explained:

Well, we don't disagree with most of the subject areas and we treat most of them as pretty good ideas and sometimes as a place to start. Like Pennsylvania history is a requirement for some grades so we went out of our way to find books and experiences that had to do with that, although I'm sure that we would have eventually gotten to it. But the requirements kind of urged those experiences to happen this year for Chloe as opposed to next year. And fire safety comes up each year. Things like that come up a lot. But then there are things like "phys-ed," well,

they're outside or at dance class or moving around all the time and it seems a little odd to have to record that kind of stuff.

In this way, unschoolers like Wendi see the state's requirements in a diminutive sense as "good idea[s]," or somewhat coincidental if not directive of her family's practices.

By that point in the morning, Samantha and Chloe announced that they had made their way through the "memory box" of photographs and memorabilia, which they had sorted with Scott's help. I sat down with Alexander as he retrieved his stack and quickly went to work sifting through which items would make it into the portfolio. After a while he explained his process:

I usually take a pretty Spartan approach; I'm kinda like Dad that way, I guess. So I'm thinking that my big things --other than the usual--this year were starting drums -- lessons and the band--, I guess lessons count, doing swing dance with Sam[antha], my new physics group, being a counselor at the farm camp [a one month camp at an organic, collective farm in Ohio], doing meals on wheels, my tutoring work [Alex volunteered as a peer-reading tutor in a program run through his township library system] and the geek club --I mean the astronomy club that Jonah keeps bringing me to—I guess I should keep that off, since it's his thing, really. Oh yeah, and here's a picture from the nature center [where Alex pursues his interest in stream ecology and works as a volunteer docent]. Okay, so I've got my big things. I'm going to give each of these pictures a line or two and I think I'm done.

With that, Alex began to sort and tape onto construction paper the pictures, tickets and brochures that represented his "big" unschooling experiences into some of the available subject areas detailed in the affidavit. After he filled in his captions, he went through the list

of remaining subjects and added additional pages. In areas such as history, mathematics, and foreign language, for which he had no pictures, he wrote the sources that he had consulted: fiction, references and textbooks, magazine articles and movies and, finally family trips that indicated his pursuit of these topics. Alex completed his task by indicating the name of his Chinese tutor, whose weekly group lessons were a part of a bartering arrangement that Scott had struck—an exchange for a carpentry workshop.

Satisfied with his informative but unembellished or “Spartan” portfolio, Alexander called to Wendi to review his work. As she sat down with him, Alex assessed his own work, “Well, it’s not something to show the grandkids, but it should probably help when I apply for college classes next year.” Wendi flipped through the pages slowly and nodded in agreement. She added, “It looks like it serves your purposes and if you feel that you’re done, you can go make lunch.” Wendi’s responses to her son reflected how, like many unschoolers, she encouraged her child to take ownership for his work. It also shows how parents take what many unschoolers would describe as a “collaborative” approach to this process, which nevertheless positioned the parent as consultant.

How Alex approached his portfolio thus revealed that he had adopted both his father’s aesthetic sense and his parent’s general perspectives on the portfolio. He also shared with them a general confidence that when he met *his own* purposes he also met the requirements set forth by the state. Like his parents, Alex presumed that how he rendered his own experiences would work out favorably. In this sense, like other unschoolers, Alex inherited his parents’ self-confident sensibilities about their own cultural capital. In other words, he had a confident attitude with regard to how he related to bureaucratic agents of the state and a sense of the state’s diminished relevance in according his cultural capital (or

his endeavors) much meaning.

Samantha and Chloe essentially engaged in similar processes a of portfolio construction as their brother. Yet, they took somewhat longer, owing to their relative inexperience and their more elaborate aesthetic senses. One of their friends' mothers had recently become involved in the hobby of scrapbooking and had shared with them techniques as well as some of the decorative materials and tools that she used to embellish the pages of her scrapbooks. As a consequence, the girls took extra time to decorate each page after they had compiled it. Moreover, Samantha, who enjoyed writing, provided considerable description about most of her endeavors.

When the girls did consult with one or the other of their parents, Wendi and Scott offered brief comments, generally geared to encourage the girls to make their own decisions. Moreover, they periodically reminded their daughters to exercise caution in what they revealed. For example, I heard Wendi suggest throughout the day that the girls might enjoy their own *private* scrapbooks. In this way, Wendi and Scott tried to convey to their daughters both that they "owned" the process and also that they were weary of the school district as the primary audience for what they considered substantial work. In this sense, they sought to encourage the distinctions between private and public work. In the end, the girls seemed to take their parent's perspective and set aside materials for private scrap books as they assembled their portfolios. As Samantha explained:

Well, all year, whenever we do something that's tough to describe, mom's been reminding us to take pictures of it. We did all that and now we have all these boxes of extra pictures --sometimes we take extra pictures anyway--that show all our projects and things. Since we don't really need too many of them after all, we

decided to make some scrapbooks. I looked at the extra pictures to try to compare them with what each of the girls included in their portfolios.

To me, it appeared that they excluded pictures and activities based on sheer volume. Samantha confirmed this but added that an additional logic of variety guided their choices:

Since we do a lot of things together, we included some of that, but we wanted to show the things that we did separately. Also, we put some projects on different pages.

As an example she found identical pictures in both of their portfolios. The pages featured a photograph of the two girls standing outside during the previous winter as they held and gestured to a multi-colored quilt. Samantha explained, "Chloe put that one on her arts page and I put it where we do community service." Samantha's text indicated that in the fall, their neighbor, Bonnie, had taught them to crochet and that during the first snowstorm of winter, she and her sister spent two days on the sofa, crocheting blankets "Until we ran out of yarn." In addition the girls decided to donate the quilt to the lounge at the vocational center [for mentally handicapped adults in their community] where their neighbor volunteered.

When we began to discuss the girls' different choices over how to categorize the project, Scott joined our conversation. His lengthy contribution encapsulated much of the unschooling logic behind the cautious approach to compliance:

You'll notice that Chloe put that crochet project in her arts page, which makes sense to her and I would never argue with that. But what she didn't put there, because it's probably not important to how she thinks about her own work, is that she had a major breakthrough in some of her spatial thinking after that jag of intense crocheting. It was part of her developmental framework, which I think the teacherly

types call “scaffolding” or something, that did just enough to push her understanding about spatial relationships to a different level. It showed up in some of her mathematics work and some in her dance, as I recall. Now she doesn’t care about that, thank goodness. I happen to care about that, because I am very interested in development, we’ve talked about the Piaget’s work and all...but I can *assure* you that the people over in the district don’t want to hear that some art project might be more appropriately represented in her mathematics page: that’s too messy for them. I guess, for us, it’s fine in the end, but it just shows how irrelevant all these categories are to learning. And that’s really the problem with this whole process, even with the portfolios: they try to put order into a very messy process and so much gets lost along the way.

Scott, like other cautiously compliant unschoolers, refrains from attempts to capture for school officials the “messiness” of learning, as he perceives it. Moreover, when Scott contends that he would not “argue” with Chloe’s choice, he reaffirms his child-centered approach to meaning-making that characterizes unschooling praxis. His choice to eschew any explanation of Chloe’s work as mathematics and to effectively disengage from any dialogue over pedagogies or learning theories with school personnel reflects Scott’s evolution towards cautious (as opposed to exuberant) compliance. Like other cautiously compliant parents, Scott, over time, decreased his engagements with school personnel and what he perceived of as their pedagogies.

The ways that Scott and Wendi provide their children what Wendi called “free reign” over their portfolios exemplifies how unschoolers both “trust” their children and nevertheless shape their children’s choices. They rely upon their children’s abilities to follow

their family's preferred and long-cultivated approaches to explaining and legitimating their practices. For example, they modeled an aesthetic sense in Alexander's case and, in the case of the girls, by "checking in" and offering alternative venues for dual scrapbooking. In these ways, parents like the Wendi and Scott subtly shape how their children develop their portfolios specifically and, in more general terms, how they explain their practices to authorities as part of their ongoing enculturation into the sensibilities of the unschooling movement.

In addition, Scott's own meaning-making process reveals a commitment to his alternative expertise around learning, which he constructs as Piaget's approach to development. While other unschoolers may draw upon different research and ideas about learning, they typically construct their perspectives along similar lines of meaning making: first, they treat children's private meanings as significant. Second, unschooling parents have their authoritative knowledges, in this case, their own theories of learning, drawn in large part from their educational and social capital (i.e. from their habits of research and sharing theories with other unschoolers). Finally, as countercultural practitioners, they construct schools as mainstream institutions that cannot appreciate, understand, or respond to their perspectives.

Thus, like many other unschoolers, who enjoy the advantages and dispositions that come with ample educational capital, social networking skills and a favorable regulatory climate, Scott and his family take a pragmatically cautious, if aloof, approach to resolve these different perspectives. In this way, they resolve some of the principled tensions they feel arise when they need to render their unschooling practices meaningful to an audience of "mainstream" educational officials by neither going out of their way to obscure their nor do

they make great efforts to highlight what they find distinctive, unique or compelling about their educative practices.

III. The Advantages of Choice in Evaluators

Homeschoolers can choose which evaluators to hire; this condition allows unschoolers to enjoy considerable flexibility and agency in their choice over the gate-keepers of the evaluation process.

As I have sought to show above, many unschoolers find themselves irritated by but nevertheless competent in the task of translating their children's unschooling experiences for school officials. They draw these competencies from their own experiences as countercultural practitioners as well as from their own educational capital and the shared set of experiences gleaned through social networks of unschoolers. These resources come in to play when unschoolers select their evaluators.

When an evaluator "signs off" on a portfolio, s/he writes up a brief report that certifies to the state that as gatekeeper, s/he has distilled from the portfolio, the interviews with the children, the test scores, and a basic assessment of the home environment that a homeschooled child has engaged in a legitimate educational experiences. Specifically, s/he certified that the student has made educational progress in all areas. In this way, evaluators decipher and, in turn, legitimate homeschoolers' experiences.

For unschoolers, it helps to have evaluators who understand their basic educational principles and practices. Parents select evaluators with reputations as amenable to their style of homeschooling, "You basically look for someone who understands your educational approach," explained Vanessa Fields. Karin Maxwell elaborated this point. She explained:

...It really behooves you to find [an evaluator] who really understands what your family is doing. You know, where someone else might see children goofing off outside all day --or year --for that matter—an evaluator who gets what unschooling is all about can appreciate children exploring a puddle or building a tree house or playing in a fort or as educationally valuable. If they don't see the value to that, then they're going to have a hard time giving your homeschooling a good evaluation, which leaves you in a bind: you have to either convince them, be less than forthright about what you're doing or, get a new evaluator. It seems to me that it's easiest to just find someone who understands what you're about from the start.

Given these options, most unschooling parents I encountered exercise their social networking and research skills to find an “unschooling-friendly” evaluator. Like many of the unschoolers who I interviewed, Karin lives in an unschooling community that has a number of such evaluators. I also heard tell of families who sought evaluators across great distances to find a compatible match with their family's style of homeschooling.

I interviewed three evaluators, who worked with several of my informants. The first, a psychologist named Julia Lowell, had unschooled with her two daughters for many years while she earned her doctorate and cultivated a home-based counseling practice. Julia's children participated in several homeschooling groups that included school-at-home homeschoolers (for writing, art and language activities in particular) and she routinely evaluated homeschoolers with a range of educational principles and practices. Julia explained that her greatest concern in conducting evaluations for unschoolers:

Isn't really what the child is doing but whether the parents have shown enough of it --and usually they only really need to show such a small fraction of what the child

does anyway. So I'm mostly concerned that they've shown that an appropriate education has taken place....It's really not that hard, because in my book, unschooling is totally appropriate.

Thus, in Julia, unschoolers can rely on an evaluator who understands their basic educational praxis, owing to her experiences as an unschooler as well as her notions of what constitutes an appropriate education.

Unschoolers also found a sympathetic evaluator in Eric Turner, who had just started in 2001 to take on homeschooling evaluations as a source of extra income. An unschooled father and special education teacher, Eric explained that he was used to "the idea of working at the child's pace and using his or her interests as a springboard for learning...so it was easy to wrap my noodle around the idea of unschooling." Somewhat new to the work, he was fairly introspective about the requirements of his role. "Evaluators are people who can stand in both worlds," he explained:

We can speak education-ese, but can also see beyond it and appreciate how there's more to learning than a curriculum. We need to get what the family is all about, then let the families know if they have successfully converted their homeschooling into something that works for the schoolies.

In this way Eric at once positions himself as both a self-effacing expert in the mores of schooling and as an unschooler who describes those in the educational apparatus as "schoolies." Thus, like Julia, Eric takes something of an advocacy position even as he facilitates understanding between his homeschooling clients and the state.

The third evaluator whom I interviewed, Louise Contino, PhD., also had experience with unschooling and unschoolers. Her children had unschooled at first, then taken classes

at a homeschooling cooperative group and eventually enrolled in a small alternative school as Louise's work as educational consultant in mathematics curriculum began to occupy more of her time. Louise shared Julia and Eric's perspective on her work. She also revealed another dimension of advocacy in which she engages in her work as evaluator. She, too, saw herself as both a translator and an advocate for unschoolers in her role as an evaluator.

Louise also emphasized that unschoolers enjoy flexibility as they meet the requirements for standardized testing. Not only can families elect to postpone a given test for up to a year and chose to define what "grade" their children are "in," they can also shape what Louise describes as a "humane" testing environment. As Louise explains:

When I proctor a test for homeschoolers, I have the flexibility to allow them to get up and stretch and take little breaks when they need to. I wish that were the case for all kids taking tests, because it's less stressful for them and you get much better results.

Like many of the unschoolers in my study, Louise equates taking bodily needs into account with "humane" treatment. Moreover, Louise's insights regarding the testing process (corroborated by a number of the parents and a few teenagers in my study), also sheds light onto an additional dimension of advantaged conditions that likely produce the relatively elevated test scores of homeschoolers nationally.¹³⁹

With such understanding evaluators, most unschoolers have only the caprices of local educational officials to worry about as potential frustrations to their unschooling. Even in those instances, they can expect aggravation as opposed to the harassment of earlier days in the homeschooling movement. In this sense, if unschooling parents can successfully

¹³⁹Unschoolers do not typically tout some of the data that suggests that homeschoolers as a population test relatively higher (in the 80th percentile on average) in nationally-ranked standardized testing (c.f. Rudner 1999. See also Welner and Welner for a critical analysis of Rudner's findings).

locate an evaluator who understands their basic educational praxis, a common condition among the unschoolers I encountered, they can enjoy considerable consumer choice and influence in one of their essential gate-keeping interactions with the state.

IV. Conclusion

While unschoolers may find their countercultural educative praxis at philosophical odds with mainstream education, they typically enjoy multiple vectors of advantage, from resources to the current favorable regulatory climate, when faced with the problem of legally legitimating their alternative educational praxis to institutions of the state. In this chapter, I considered how, a countercultural practitioners, unschoolers assert their legitimacy as citizens vis-à-vis the state in generally favorable encounters with the state's educational regulatory apparatus. I illustrated the range of ideological and practical "work," as well as forms of educational and social capital that unschoolers bring to this process. I illustrated how unschoolers meet the challenge to navigate the "system" of state-organized education in light of their principled and practical opposition to what they perceive as mainstream educational practices. I showed how unschoolers rely upon their own pedagogical principles, social networks and habits of negotiating with those in authority to relate to state power and manage conflicts with officials.

My detailed consideration of the various tacks and positions that unschoolers take when they construct and convey "appropriate educational experience" through portfolios revealed that unschoolers draw upon facility with educational jargon as well as an understanding of how their work might be received when they navigate the tensions at work in presenting an "appropriate education." We see, for example, that when they develop their

portfolios, unschoolers make strategic choices about what to share that reflect their ongoing development as countercultural practitioners. Moreover, a sense of solidarity with other unschoolers and their perspectives on the state and its educational apparatus also influence how unschoolers represent their practices.

I have also shown that as with other dimensions of their lifestyles, when unschoolers provide their children “free-reign” over their own portfolios, they nevertheless shape their children’s choices: They both rely upon their children’s abilities to approximate their family’s preferred approach to the process (as was the case with Alexander Mackler) and they also subtly, if not actively, shape how their children create their portfolios (as was the case with Samantha and Chloe Mackler).

Family-selected evaluators reveal further conditions that advantage unschoolers in these processes. Here, unschoolers enjoy a free-market in which to transfer social capital and networking skills into favorable gate-keeping encounters. Favorable conditions in the wider, “choice” based educational landscape that figure into the neoliberal state, grant unschoolers a comfortable place in the seemingly laissez-faire educational marketplace.

This chapter advances my ongoing contention that as countercultural practitioners, unschoolers draw upon their considerable educational and social resources as well as confidences gleaned through their ongoing development as countercultural practitioners, in this case to respond to challenges from institutional authority. I showed how in the process of developing their portfolios for evaluators, unschoolers both rely upon and continue to develop their ongoing habits of asserting the legitimacy of their experiences and furthermore continue to habituate their children into these processes. As it dealt with the key lifestyle

dimension of legitimacy, this final chapter advanced my case that educational and social capital crucially advantage contemporary countercultural practitioners.

Ch 9. Conclusion

I'm with [John] Holt, who said, "Let us escape from the walled garden of Happy, Safe, Protected, Innocent, Childhood."

Bruce Maxwell, paraphrasing John Holt's *Escape From Childhood* (1974)

When Sarah announced that she decided to forgo college for now it threw us for a loop at first. We always assumed that college was in the cards...We should not have been surprised, though. When you raise your child to question just about everything in life and when they never cease to surprise you, can you really be shocked when they question whether they actually need a college degree to be a happy, productive member of society?

(Unschooling mother Ruth Matilsky in *Life Learning Magazine*, Mar/Apr 2003)

Revisiting the Countercultural Experience in the Neoliberal Era

In the milieu of the neoliberal state and a market-based educational climate, unschooling parents are challenging rationalization and standardization in education and are creating alternative processes for producing educated persons (Cox 1995, 1996; Levinson et al 1996). Countercultural movements like the unschooling movement illustrate how people and groups work out alternative educational logics and assert the centrality of alternative skills and knowledges. This study provides insight into how a particular countercultural endeavor, unschooling, works through an examination of some of the possibilities and challenges that unschoolers face as they create, enact, and legitimate a lifestyle that takes childhood as its target of critique and innovation.

This study, which looked through the lens of a contemporary countercultural movement and its inherent and lived tensions, provided a crucial and heretofore unexamined perspective on education in the U.S. from vantage point of people who seek to challenge the rationalization and standardization that they perceive as rampant and objectionable in state-overseen education. It illuminated the perspective and experiences of people who in their daily lives create viable alternatives to an educational system whose future is uncertain (Tyack and Cuban 1995).

The concept of a counterculture treats such phenomena as historically developed complexes of institutions and practices as well as participant's structures of meaning, forms of consciousness and ways of organization everyday life. In these ways, unschoolers engage in a countercultural endeavor. Yet, while unschoolers see themselves as enacting practices that are "countercultural" or alternative to what they construct as "the mainstream," they actually reify cultural lifestyles; they both draw upon sociocultural resources available through the "mainstream" as they construct it and in the end choose educational paths and values that reproduce in other practices (such as college attendance) the status systems they seek to challenge.

Yet unschoolers clearly try to achieve an alternative way of being human, an alternative moral and social orders of sorts. To be sure, their structures of meaning and forms of consciousness do organize many dimensions of their everyday lives and identities. I therefore specifically addressed crucial lifestyle dimensions of the unschooling counterculture. In chapter two I considered how unschoolers unique lifestyles and pedagogies distinguish them from other homeschoolers. In chapter three I considered how unschoolers' reasons to unschool build through their ongoing development as

countercultural practitioners. In chapter four I considered unschoolers' childrearing practices. In chapter five, I attended to unschoolers' use of time and space, and their interactional mores at home. In chapter six, I considered key dimensions of unschoolers' consumption habits. In chapter seven, I addressed how unschoolers used community-based resources. I took up issues of legal legitimation in chapter eight. Throughout, I showed how unschoolers draw upon and cultivate their considerable educational and social resources, as well as confidences gleaned through their ongoing development as countercultural practitioners, to sustain and legitimate their experiences as countercultural practitioners and to inculcate their children into their countercultural sensibilities. I also illustrated how unschoolers' child-centered theories of learning and their exoticized notions of community life, what I term a village epistemology, often occlude the shaping roles of these parental resources.

I also examined how unschoolers' countercultural identities and perspectives on childhood develop over time and in a dialectical manner through their experiences in unschooling. These identities and perspectives include both an ongoing construction of the mainstream and responses to real and perceived challenges to their practices. In this way, I considered the workings and meanings of a contemporary countercultural endeavor.

The unschooling experience complicates our understanding of the so-called opportunities and choices created in the widened educational "marketplace." It illustrates how, on the one hand, the opportunities of the opened educational milieu can energize parents to take a greater role and have greater control of the content and process of their children's education. On the other hand, the unschooling experience also suggests the limitations of parental "choice." The educational experiences parents actually are able to

provide depends on the types of social and structural supports (forms of educational, social, economic capital) or resources that they can draw upon. This study points to the limits and possibilities of parent initiated countercultural educational visions and practices in this era of neoliberal educational reform. It shows what it “takes” to instantiate a countercultural identity and sustain a countercultural lifestyle in the context of educational practice, particularly how various forms of capital, namely social and educational capital, shape, influence, and in some ways limit, the countercultural experience. While others who study countercultures have attended to social networks, my study brings to the fore the crucial role of educational capital, particularly in how practitioners draw upon and develop authoritative countercultural knowledges to inform lifestyle practice. Through these resources, successful unschooling practice is predicated upon and contributes to the social reproduction of advantage.

Yet unschooling also points to genuine possibilities for change within families if not more widely. Recall, for example the ways in which parents with limited educational capital developed new educational practices or habits of social networking in their development as countercultural practitioners; these parents became lifelong learners; they were able to acquire the educational capital they needed to unschool their children from their social networks and by making use of materials that widely circulated in the unschooling public sphere. What possibilities do the experiences of working class unschoolers create for their children that might help them break out of the trap of social reproduction that circumscribe their life chances? This study illustrates the important role of social capital in educational advantage. In this way, it illuminates the complex interplay between educational/economic

and social capital that in some ways leads to the reproduction in a stratified educational system on the one hand and the possibilities of change on the other.

Directions for Further Study

This study leaves unaddressed, however, a number of questions about how countercultural visions are realized. For example, in order to gauge whether and to what extent this countercultural vision of producing social beings is really about opportunities for social transformation and mobility or about reproduction of privilege, one might need to study unschooling longitudinally. Do unschooled young people create lives that realize their parents' principles and values? Also, what of the families who do not find success in unschooling? A longitudinal study, one that included a large and diverse sample of unschooling families would capture the range of experiences and educational trajectories among families who choose to unschool their children. This kind of longitudinal study might also reveal what happens to the young people who are unschooled later on in their lives. What difference does it make in their lifestyle and in how they choose to raise their own children? Do they become the kinds of countercultural persons that their parents envision?

I frequently referred to gender politics as the leitmotif of this study because the practical and cultural work of mothering, maternal expertise, and gendered divisions of labor emerged as a salient feature in the lives of most of the unschooling parents I encountered and were sometimes fraught with contradiction. Yet rather than unearth the richly complicated issues that unschooling poses for gender, I poked my toe around the edges. Unschooling gives rise to a whole host of questions about gender socialization and the

gendered politics of parenting, education, expertise and engendered modes of knowledge production, to name a few, to which another study might do justice.

I also made a good faith effort to characterize some of the mores of interaction between unschooled young people and the adults around them. Unschoolers speak in stylized ways with children that not only reflect middle-class modes of parent-child interaction (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), but also reveal their efforts to cultivate a certain kind of learning and disposition in their children. While I captured the flavor of these interactions and the possible intents that produce them, a more detailed and studied “micro” sociolinguistic or semiotic analysis of how and why unschoolers speak with their children as they do would yield interesting insights into several lines of inquiry. It might illuminate for example, the relationship between language and power in adult-child interactions, or the linguistic dimensions of motivation and the language of responding to children’s work, etc.

In an additional line of possible research, unschooling brings to the fore several aspects of “work,” which I focused on in some ways and underrepresented in others. I tried to show how unschoolers treat play and the general experiences of childhood as “work,” and I described some of the ways that unschooling families organize their work lives to sustain their lifestyles. Yet unschoolers’ work lives pose interesting questions for those who study shifting work trends and their meanings. Writer Daniel Pink (2001) has extolled that homeschoolers occupy the vanguard of the “free agent” nation, i.e. those in the economy who carve out non-institutional work lives. These claims merit further investigation and analysis.

Finally, and most obviously, my study did not consider a concern at the center of much educational research, the issue of instructional outcomes. To be sure, my work

contributes to educational research focusing on how people learn new identities and practices. I hope that my ethnography provides people interested in children's activity with a sense of what unschooled children do, particularly as opposed to what school-at-home homeschoolers do. In this sense, this study gives a glimpse onto alternative educational practices that may be of interest to educators. Yet, it asks nothing of outcomes beyond the issues of educational equivalence that I studied from unschoolers' and evaluator's perspectives in chapter eight. As I suggested early on, lumping unschoolers with other homeschoolers in "outcomes" based studies such as Rudner's (1999) elides the differences in educational philosophy and pedagogical practice among homeschoolers. Moreover, in relation to these philosophies, views of what constitutes valued educational outcomes vary widely. Yet, I suspect that a careful analysis of how unschoolers fare throughout their school years and beyond could illuminate some of the issues that unschooling poses for progressive and non-standardized education.

Coda: My Maternal Double-Consciousness And The Dialectics Of the Bus Stop

As the yellow doors of the school bus closed this morning, they carried my six-year old Ella off to her first day of first grade at our local (and affluent) public school. I continued walking, with my nineteen-month old Maya in tow in her sling. I walked with hopes that Maya would fall asleep, so that I can finish writing; my habit all of last year as our attachment parenting spelled an erratic nap schedule. Despite this attachment-borne obstacle, I finished the dissertation in this way. The bus doors opened a new chapter in Ella's life and put a bit of finality in our family's journey with unschooling.

To be sure, Ella's dearest friend, Madeline Small, continues to unschool. Visits to the Small's house often put us squarely back in the "yes" environments that characterize unschoolers' homes. They also remind me of what I find the intense work of cultivating an unschooled lifestyle. Yet, these days, I know the difference between their world and ours. Not so during many moments of writing this analysis. After Maya's birth, we pulled Ella out of Montessori preschool for a 1-semester experiment with unschooling. Although I found the lifestyle of flexibility and familial closeness appealing at first, the experiment served to solidify my feeling that unschooling takes certain dispositions and types of skills to work. The social networking, home design and near-constant contact with my child taxed my patience as a parent and an academic. Moreover, the maternalist dimensions of an unschooled lifestyle, at least for our family, felt, to me, confining rather than liberating, as they did for many of the mothers I encountered in my research. In the end, I was simply unwilling, if not incapable of sharing all my time, space and energies into this lifestyle enterprise.

This new chapter in our lives spells continued involvement in our daughter's education but of a different sort; we've made the "mainstream" choices for the contexts and types of interactions that will be "educational" for her. Certainly, the school and the work it assigns Ella during the day and at night and the routines associated with getting to school on time and ready for full participation will shape the tempos, interactions, consumption habits and modes of legitimacy in our lives just as much as unschooling influences those facets of unschoolers' lifestyles. But while I'll be drawing upon my educational capital to support my daughter's school experiences, most of my social networking skills will go into my own career, rather than hers. And this, for us, is where the rubber hit the road toward the school.

When the bus doors closed, I also imagined other possible lives. What would we be doing today if we were unschooling? What would we be doing today if our local schools were inadequately staffed? didn't feel safe? had a reputation for "kill and drill" and worksheets rather than critical thinking and competitive college admissions? Would Maya be off at daycare rather than on my hip if it weren't for all that educational capital or the maternalist sensibility that I slowly adopted through my research and my work as a childbirth teacher? These choices and possibilities come from all of the vectors of advantage that we've cultivated through our social situatedness as much as through our biographies.

But in *this* life, the one where our older daughter goes to school and my other daughter stays home until I have my own career sorted out, we will have still learned much from our time with the unschoolers. And given the consumer-oriented climate in education in general, our experiences with unschooling will make us more vigilant consumers of educational services. How many hours a day will Ella be seated in a desk? Will she be allowed and encouraged to ask questions or merely to answer them? Will I feel ill-at-ease when Ella tells me that her class has finally "earned" an additional recess because the jar of "good behavior balls" has finally filled? Dare I ask these questions of her teachers? and are they relevant once my child steps within her classroom, with its own schooled culture? Of course, if I fret over conventional schooling from an unschooling perspective, will I ever be satisfied with these choices? I suspect that the unschooling perspective will always partially shape how I see education, as I hope it will for my colleagues and readers.

This journey with the unschooling counterculture provided a sense of what's possible as the limits of that possibility and a renewed relationship with the "mainstream." I have come to see the value of questioning and critiquing the mainstream and of the limits of

doing so. It is with these newfound sensibilities that I move forward as an academic and with my family, to the next chapter in our ventures with education.

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